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## THE SCIENCE FICTION ISSUE

**FEATURING** NO MAN'S SKY, DESTINY: THE DARK BELOW,  
THE FUTURE OF SCIENCE FICTION GAMES,  
AND THE TOP 25 SCI-FI GAMES OF ALL TIME





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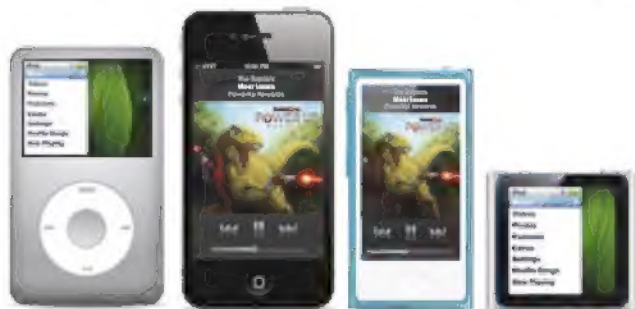
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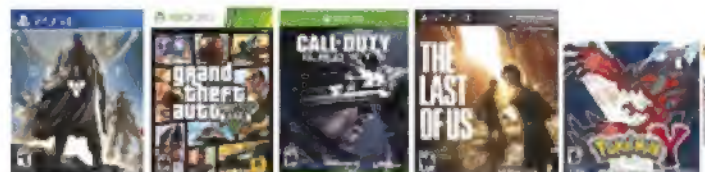
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## Games Are Science Fiction Come To Life



ANDY McNAMARA  
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF  
andy@gameinformer.com

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comment on this letter at  
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Science fiction and video games have gone hand in hand from the start. A nuclear scientist named William Higinbotham made Tennis for Two as head of the Brookhaven Lab's Instrumentation Division back in 1958. While it was only a primitive tennis simulator, his creation must have seemed like science fiction to the hundreds of visitors that lined up to play. Remember, it was 1958, eight years before *Star Trek* would change TV and science fiction forever. Controlling objects on a small oscilloscope must have blown the minds of all who got a chance to play.

In many ways, video games are science fiction come to life – a virtual reality we control. Games have reflected this romance with science fiction since the very beginning; the first commercially released video game, the arcade unit Computer Space, was a sci-fi space shooter. Since then, games have evolved from small blips to giant multi-user worlds where just about anything can happen.

The second video games came to life, they were used to fulfill our dreams. With its fantastic technology and strange alien races, science fiction was at the core of those dreams. We would ask ourselves what other universes could exist; video games gave us a way to go there. Someone who played Tennis for Two in 1958 could never imagine opening up a portal to another world on a giant screen in your living room or a virtual-reality unit on your head, yet that is the world we live in today.

We dream of a world where robots roam the Earth (or perhaps rule it?), worlds where thousands of light years are traveled in an instant, and planets both far and near where we either coexist or battle with alien life. Science fiction is a broad term, but it is most certainly one that resonates with gamers everywhere.

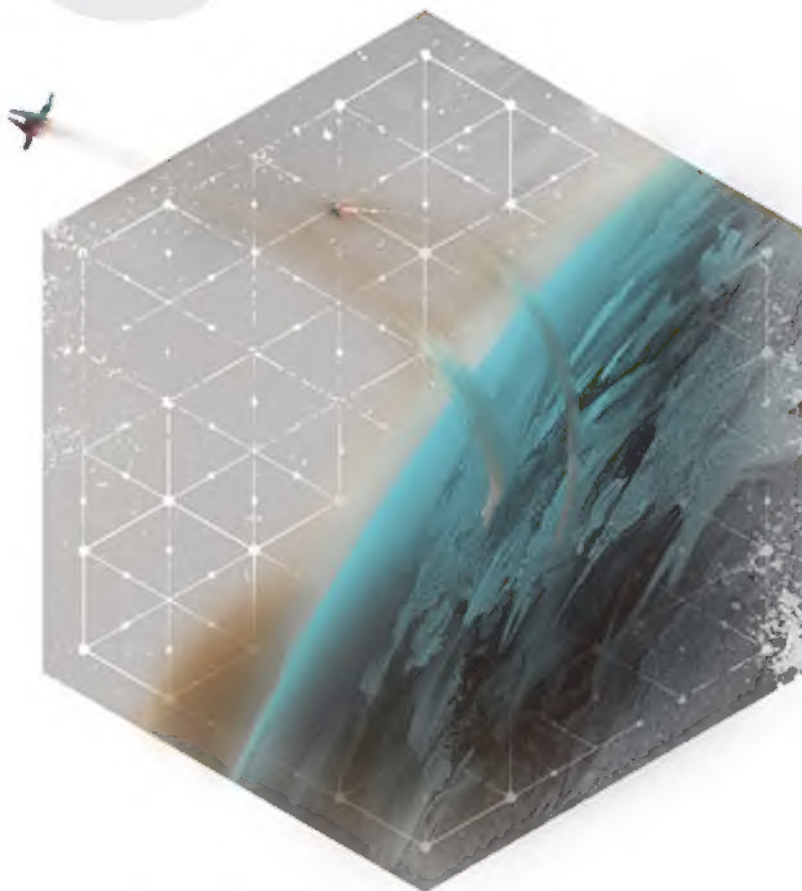
So enjoy our issue dedicated to the universes beyond our imaginations. Some of the greatest games in game history were inspired by science fiction; in fact, the entire video game industry owes the genre a bit of thanks.

Enjoy the issue.

Cheers,

P.S. We integrated previews into our science-fiction feature, so don't panic that it's missing from the issue. The section will return in full next month.

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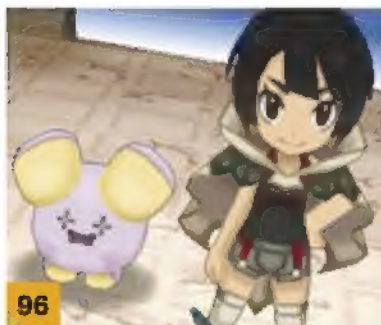


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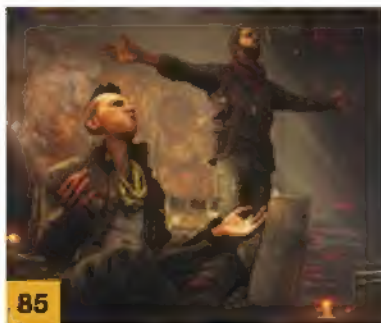
### The Science Fiction Issue

Visions of the future – both optimistic and pessimistic – pervade the video game medium. We decided it was time to devote a whole issue to the genre. We take an in-depth look at one of the most compelling science-fiction universes on the way in *No Man's Sky* and see what else we can expect from the genre in the future. We also count down the 25 best science-fiction games of all time.





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## regulars

### » 6 Feedback

This month readers respond to our recent interview with Anita Sarkeesian and let us know they watched and donated to our Extra Life charity live stream (which you should do next year!). Readers also question our game of the month, and ask us what's going on with Link in the new Zelda.

### » 12 Connect

We take a look at the state of the current-gen consoles one year after release, offer some feedback on Nintendo's Amiibo figures, and report from Blizzcon and the reveal of Overwatch. We also look at your favorite games and tell you why they're terrible in the long-awaited return of Sacred Cow Barbecue feature.

### » B2 Reviews

We review the new-gen version of Grand Theft Auto V, Assassin's Creed Unity, Far Cry 4, Super Smash Bros. for Wii U, the Pokémon Ruby & Sapphire remakes and Halo: The Master Chief Collection, among many more.

### » 100 Game Over

Most science-fiction stories take place in an ambiguous future where technology is either better, or we don't fully realize its potential, left behind by a long-expired civilization. It turns out, though, most have hard dates attached to them, so we created a timeline to give you a better sense of what will take place when.





Readers react to a recent interview with equal parts admiration and condemnation, while others inquire about our Game of the Month qualifications, Link's new look, and the fate of a Resident Evil veteran.

## Extra, Extra!

I just wanted to say that your Extra Life livestream was so much fun! I was fortunate enough to be able to donate this year, and you guys and gals did not disappoint! There were a lot of memorable moments, like Camel Kim, and Dino Joe Juba's "politically provocative opinions" on Taz-Mania. Not only is your magazine awesome, but you guys are awesome when you do events like Extra Life. Things like charity livestreams are a reminder that the gaming community is capable of beautiful things when we all work together. Keep up the great work! Also, to anyone and everyone who donated, you're awesome, too!

**Miguel Cordero**  
via email

Thanks to Game Informer's outstanding community, we raised more than \$18,000 for Children's Miracle Network hospitals, while wearing goofy hats, doing terrible karaoke, and playing games for 24 hours straight. Watch our archived stream of the shenanigans (you can still donate!) by visiting [bit.ly/glextralife](http://bit.ly/glextralife).

## A Modest Proposal

Thanks for featuring an interview with Anita Sarkeesian (Critique & Controversy, issue 259). The work she is doing with Feminist Frequency and Tropes Vs. Women In Video Games is important for the industry. As a woman who has been playing games since I was a kindergartener rocking Wonder Boy on the Sega Master System, I can't help but wonder how my identity has been impacted by the portrayal of women in the games that I have loved and played for nearly as long as I have been alive. Anita's work – and the strength and bravery that she displays in the face of the threats that she deals with – is heroic. She is helping to make gaming safer and better for the next generation of gamers.

**Jenna McDavid**  
via email

Thank you for the excellent Q&A with Anita Sarkeesian. She is doing really important work by highlighting the dangerously casual sexism and racism in some video games. As a gamer and a father of a two-year-old girl, I have often found myself conflicted while playing certain games such as Grand

Theft Auto. While those kinds of games can be brilliant and great fun to play, I can't help but notice that female characters are often portrayed negatively. I want my daughter to grow up playing games that show all the many facets of women. It's absurd that critiquing games and recommending critical thinking inspires so much hatred in so many gamers. How can more realistic, varied portrayals of women in games be anything but positive?

**Josh Bledsoe**  
via email

Like many of the readers who expressed gratitude for our interview with Ms. Sarkeesian, we don't understand why it's so controversial to discuss such a largely self-evident problem; you don't have to look very far to find plenty of examples of women in games being portrayed as helpless damsels in distress or over-sexualized halfwits. Advocating for developers to create more diverse and thoughtful characters seems like a no-brainer, but not everyone appreciated the interview...

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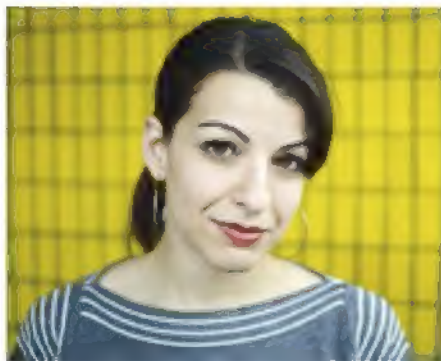


## Devil's Advocate

I found your interview to be very biased in favor of Ms. Sarkeesian. It only provides a one-sided point of view, with her being portrayed as a victim who is only trying to do good in the gaming community. Why didn't you ask the obvious questions, like how much research did she do with the money she raised, or what does she say to those who have offered counter-arguments to her video series? Also, where are these examples of her getting harassed and threatened with death and rape? I can't recall anyone going to that extreme against her online. So again, I ask why was only one side presented to us?

Daniel Peterson  
via email

We received plenty of negative responses to our interview with Ms. Sarkeesian, most of which were far too vitriolic to print. Even the civil letters seemed hopelessly preoccupied with discrediting her work in an attempt to invalidate or outright ignore her criticisms – because only the most meticulously vetted and incontrovertible opinions are allowed on the Internet. What's even more insidious is the casual way some readers question her motives, her credentials as a "gamer," and – worst of all – the instances of harassment. For the record: The most recent death threats against Ms. Sarkeesian were sent to and reported by Utah State University. The threats are real, and not only do they support the argument that the gaming community can be inhospitable toward women, we will continue to take a zero tolerance policy against any kind of harassment. You don't have to agree with Ms. Sarkeesian's opinions, but like everyone else, she has the right to voice them.



## Missing Link?

I'm a huge Legend of Zelda fan, and I love all of the entries, but I feel like Nintendo is taking the series in a direction I don't want them to. The one trailer Nintendo has revealed for the upcoming Wii U installment makes Link seem like someone he's not. It shows him jumping off his horse, high into the air, and then shooting his bow in slow motion. I feel like this doesn't fit Link at all. Also, Link wasn't even wearing his normal green tunic in the trailer. Do you think that Nintendo is taking The Legend of Zelda down a good path?

Jonnathan Jones  
via email

It does seem like Link has been Legolas-ified a bit, but we still don't know enough about the project to question Nintendo's (potentially) new direction. What we do know is that the changes Nintendo has introduced to the series over the years have largely been positive, and even drastic shifts (like Toon Link) haven't overshadowed the core Legend of Zelda experience. Hopefully, Nintendo will share more info soon.

## Best News Tip Of The Month:

"I made a pretty neat Star Wars Sarracc Bundt cake on my blog."

## Short Answers To Readers' Burning Questions:

"Is Dragon Age's Qunari a race or religion?"

Both, kind of.

"Can you guys convince Insomniac and/or Microsoft to bring Sunset Overdrive to PC?"

Probably not, but we'd be happy to take the credit if it ever happens.

"Are the people proclaiming that Nintendo is doomed kids or trolls?"

Prophets (kidding!)

## Question Of The Month:

What's your favorite game to play with friends and why?



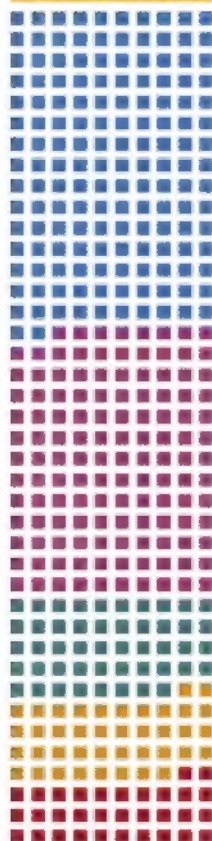
(Left) The lead developers and co-founders of Avalanche Studios assembled for a quick picture. And Ben Reeves. We couldn't stop him from popping his dumb head in the picture (Right) We also visited the headquarters of Shinra Technologies, Square Enix's new cloud gaming company. Granted, the fledgling office is a little underwhelming at the moment, but it hasn't dampened Jacob Navok and Colin Williamson's enthusiasm

GI SPY  
continued on page 8

CANDID PHOTOS FROM THE VIDEO GAME INDUSTRY



## On Your Mind



■ **38%** Most-Played Game Responses

■ **32%** Sarkesian Interview Reactions

■ **12%** Build A Gaming PC Guide

■ **10%** Final Fantasy VI Tribute Love

■ **8%** Super Smash Bros. Hype

## Mistaken Identity

I just finished reading your "Where Are They Now?" article about the Resident Evil S.T.A.R.S. Alpha and Bravo teams (Game Over, issue 259). Although most of it was spot on, there was something that has been bothering me. Bravo Member Edward Dewey's entry stated that he was killed by zombie dogs inside Bravo's downed helicopter. However, Dewey actually died on the *Ecliptic Express* where Rebecca Chambers put him to rest. The body in Bravo's downed helicopter was actually Kevin Dooley. He was not a member of Bravo team, and although he's not the main pilot, he was the one that flew them that night and was killed by Cerberus dogs, where he was discovered by Alpha Team.

**Christopher Kiefel**  
via email

We have no idea what you're talking about Chris, but when we asked Tim (our resident Resident Evil nerd and author of the article) if your assertions are correct, he facepalmed and fessed up to his mistake. Congratulations: You are truly the master of Resident Evil trivia!

## There Can Be Only One

I was very surprised and upset to see that FIFA 15 was given the Game of the Month award over Super Smash Bros. for the 3DS in issue 259. The FIFA games are great, but every year I feel it is just a rehash of the last installment with a few new features. Super Smash Bros. for 3DS, however, is a whole new game with new modes, added characters, new gameplay mechanics, and a new way to play. So I am curious to know why FIFA was given the award over Smash Bros. even though they received the same score.

**Ben Jackson**  
via email

We'd be careful with the "just another installment with some new features" accusation, Ben, as it could just as easily be applied to Nintendo's beloved fighting series. In the event of a tie, the GI staff has a discussion to decide which title should be crowned Game of the Month. FIFA 15 came out ahead, but Super Smash Bros. gets a second chance this month on Wii U; check out page 94 to see how it fared.



## Game Time

In issue 259, we asked players what game they've put the most hours into. The usual suspects came out on top, with Bethesda, Blizzard, and BioWare stealing a staggering amount of our respondents' lives.

Ever since I bought the Mass Effect trilogy, I have put about 250 hours into the series. The RPG elements blended into the action-packed gameplay, interesting characters, and an amazing story influenced by my actions kept me interested the entire time.

**Jacob Wells**

I put more than 2,000 hours into The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion on Xbox 360, spanning six characters, all the DLC, and getting every achievement. Then, while transferring my data to my new 360, my Oblivion saves were corrupted and I lost all of my achievements. It was the most devastating moment of my gaming life.

**Mike Wilson**

I would have to say World of Warcraft. I've been playing it for nine years, and my account says my total playtime is about 400 days. It's a game I can always fall back on, and it's more fun with a good guild.

**Jon Weise**

(Left) Ben Reeves recently got exclusive hands-on time with Peter Molyneux's favorite lamp. It was...illuminating

(Right) It didn't take Nintendo's Terry Chan, David Young, and Ali Rapp long to find a few favorites in Game Informer's vault — along with Link's Master Sword



GI SPY

continued on page 10



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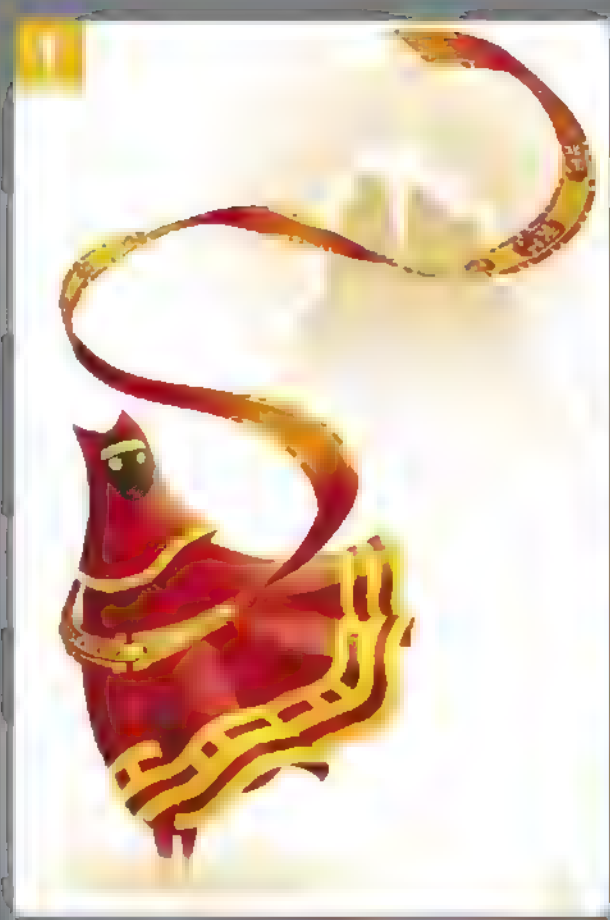
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# 1 Abigail Lawton

Searching for a friend to scale the mountain.

# 2 Chris Humphries

PRAISE THE SUN!

# 3 Danny Kissel

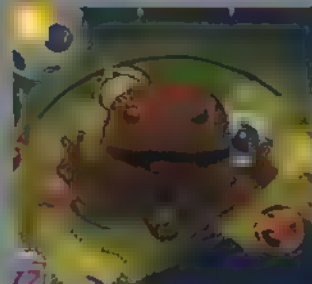
This planha plant stands in at 31" and is made from six green striped Cushaw squash and two pumpkins

# 4 Matt Gondek and Brian Gonnella

With a little help from the community, they made a little game.

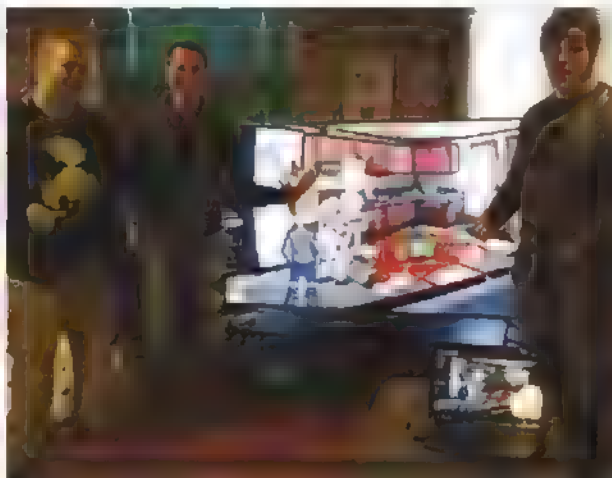
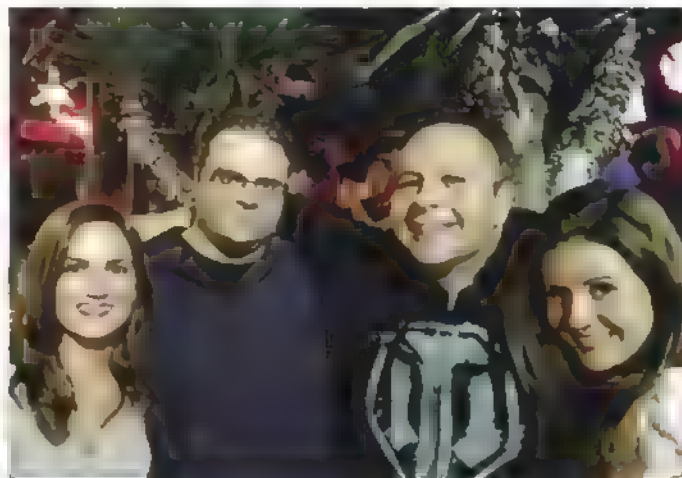
# 5 Michael Barrett

If you don't keep an eye on Sackboy, he'll take over the planet in the name of Nixon.

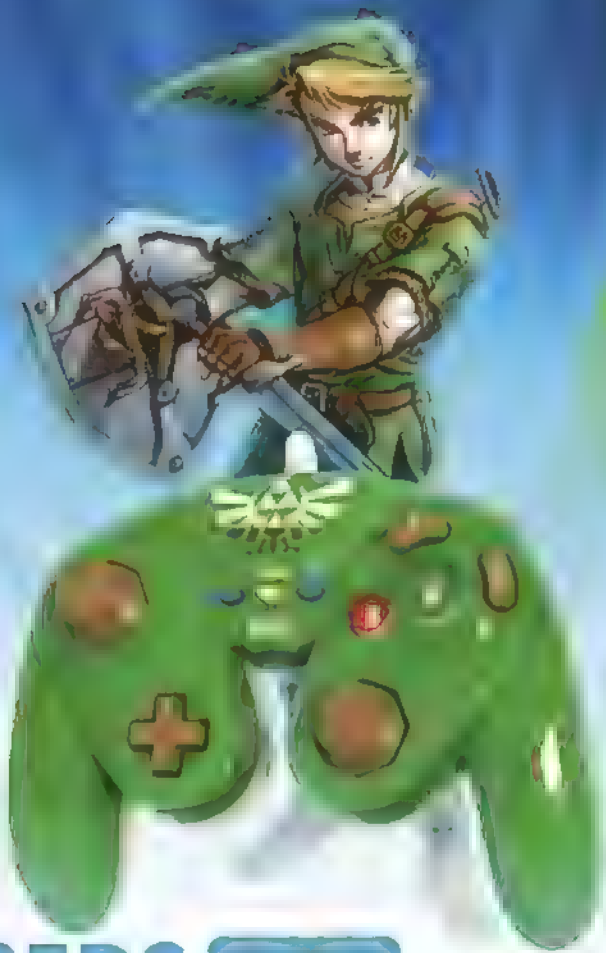


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(Left) Everybody loves Dan Tack, including Wargaming's Kelley James, Alex Brewer-Disarino, and Jamie King  
(Right) Daedalic Entertainment's Craas Wolter and Nexus Game Studios' Enric Costa don't seem nearly as concerned with what's happening in Randal's Monday as Ben does







# CHALLENGERS APPROACHING !



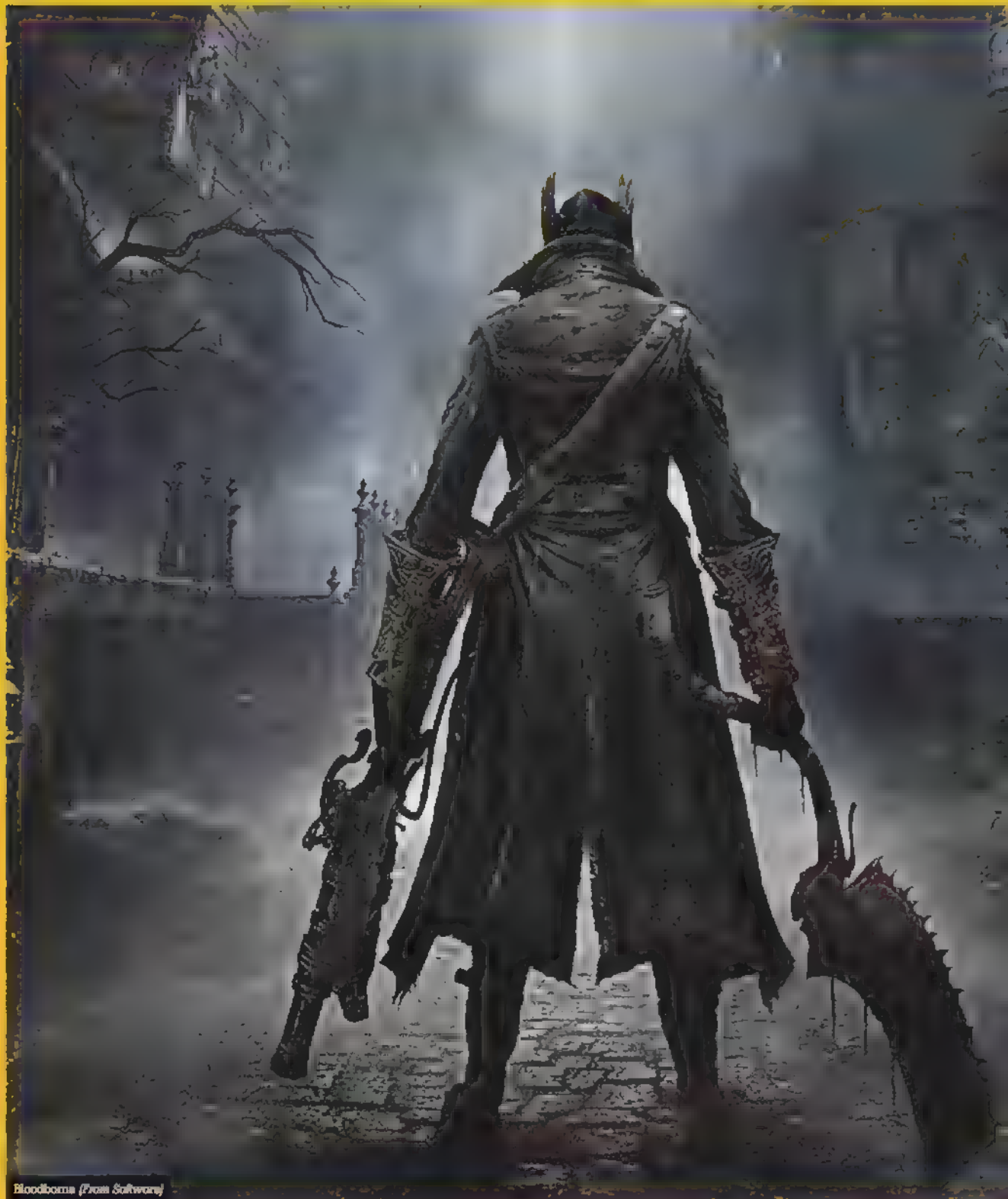
Wired Fight Pad



Wii U



# PlayStation 4



Bloodborne (From Software)

blizzard's big surprise

here come the amibos

top ten alien races

gamer 2014 super  
smash bros 3ds winner  
sam buzby

afterwords  
dragon age inquisition  
sacred cow barbecue



# & Xbox One

**YEAR ONE**  
**STATUS REPORT**



*It's been a year since Sony and Microsoft's new consoles hit the market. If you're still sitting on the sidelines of this new generation, read this report to get a better idea of what system is right for you. by Matt Helgeson*

## YEAR IN REVIEW

Sony rode a wave of Microsoft PR blunders to an early lead in this generation's console war. Right now, the company has sold close to 14 million PlayStation 4 units worldwide, nearly double Microsoft's total. It's also establishing itself as the lead platform for third-party titles, and is often the best-selling version of big third-party games. It's also reported to be the technologically superior console, which is sometimes (but not always) evident in a better overall resolution and framerate on PlayStation 4 games compared to Xbox One.

## MAJOR EXCLUSIVES

DC Universe Online, Driveclub, Escape Plan, Infamous: Second Son, Killzone: Shadow Fall, Knack, MLB 14: The Show, N+++, Resogun, The Last of Us: Remastered, Transistor, Unfinished Swan, LittleBigPlanet 3

Contrast, Dead Nation: Apocalypse Edition, Doki Doki Universe, Don't Starve, Dust: An Elysian Tale, Escape Plan, Fez, Injustice: Gods Among Us - Ultimate Edition, Mercenary Kings, Outlast, Pix the Cat, PixelJunk Shooter: Ultimate, Resogun, Road Not Taken, Secret Ponchos, Spelunky, Sportsfriends, Steamworld Dig, Stick It to the Man!, Strider, The Binding of Isaac: Rebirth, TowerFall: Ascension, Trine 2: Complete Story, Velocity 2X

**Destiny (\$449.99)** • Special edition white PlayStation 4 console and controller, physical copy of Activision's Destiny, 30-day trial PlayStation Plus membership. The \$509.99 version of this bundle comes with an extra DualShock 4 controller.

**DualShock 4 Bundle (\$459.99)** • Standard black PlayStation 4 console and two DualShock 4 controllers.

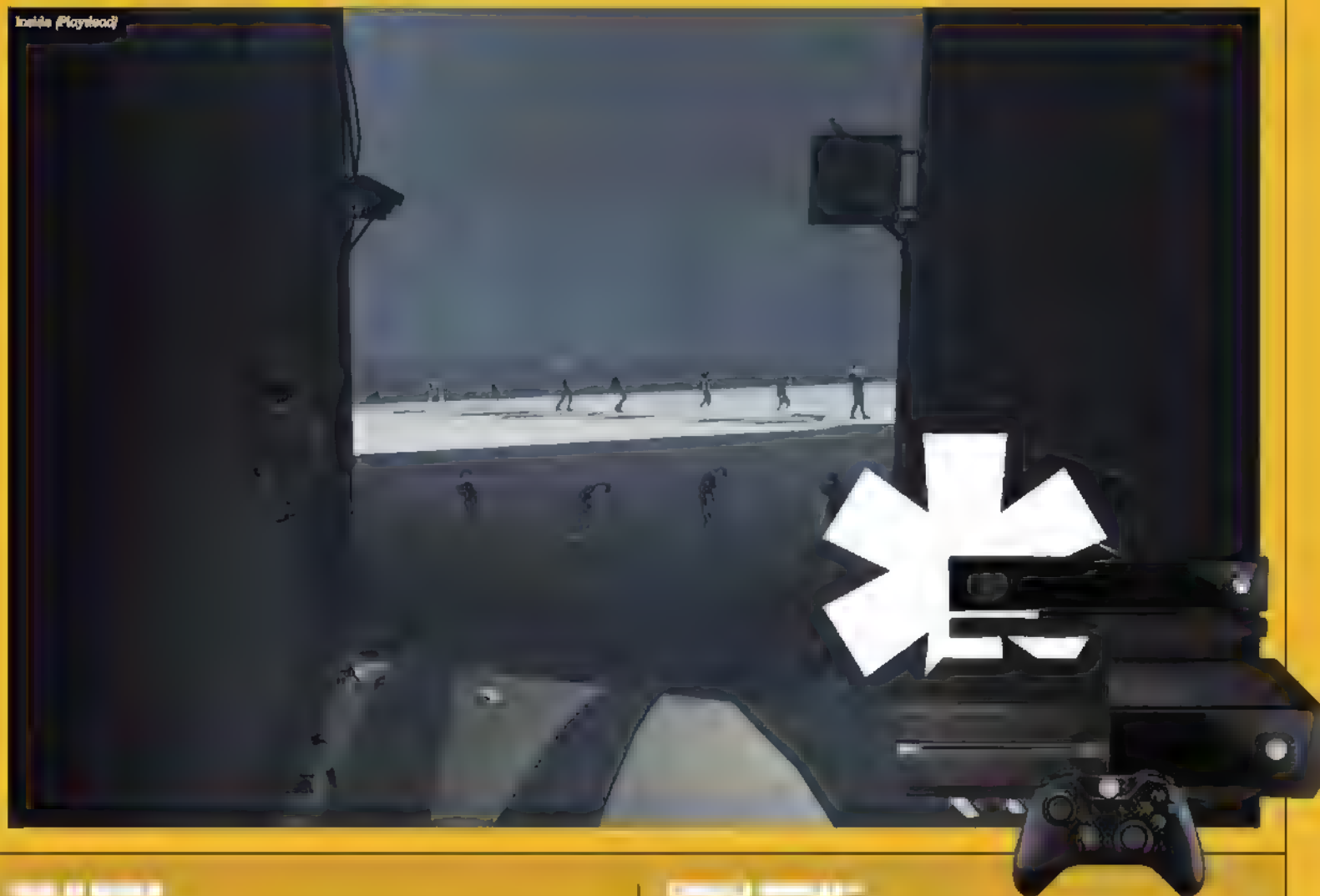
*\*Some retailers still have stock of previous bundles for Battlefield 4, Knack, Killzone: Shadow Fall, Infamous: Second Son, and others.*

One of the PlayStation 4's biggest strengths is perhaps its biggest weakness: the DualShock 4 controller. In design, function, and ergonomics, it's the best Sony controller ever made by a long shot. However, it's not very durable. Many gamers are already having problems with wear of the rubberized sticks and many other build-quality-related issues. Another common complaint is that the system's long-awaited suspend/resume mode is still not available.

Sony also needs to come out stronger on the software side. Despite having a more robust international studio system, this advantage is not showing this holiday, especially after The Order: 1886 slipped into 2015. In fact, Microsoft's first-party offerings this season (anchored by Sunset Overdrive, Forza Horizon 2, and Halo: Master Chief Collection) are superior. It will also be interesting to see how Microsoft's temporary holiday price drop cuts into Sony's sales.

Bloodborne, DayZ, Everybody's Gone to the Rapture, Gran Turismo Sport, Journey HD, MLB: The Show series, Ratchet & Clank, Soma, Tearaway Unfolded, The Order: 1886, The Tomorrow Children, The Witness, Uncharted 4: A Thief's End, Until Dawn, Untitled Quantic Dream game





#### WHAT TO KNOW

It was a rough first year for Xbox One. Some of it was due to PR scandals and flip-flopping on issues like a ways on DRM. Most of it was due to the system being \$100 more than PlayStation 4 thanks to the inclusion of the bundled Kinect camera. Thankfully, Microsoft came to its senses and dumped Kinect, but the system is still lagging behind PS4 on the sales charts. Now, due to a temporary holiday season price drop, it's \$50 cheaper than the PlayStation 4 at \$349. Microsoft is hoping this will help close the gap. The Xbox One's solid lineup of exclusive games, including Titanfall, Dead Rising, Halo: The Master Chief Collection, and Sunset Overdrive, should help.

#### WHAT TO OWN

Crimson Dragon, D4: Dark Dreams Don't Die, Dead Rising 3, Fantasia: Music Evolved, Forza Motorsport 5, Forza Horizon 2, Halo: The Master Chief Collection, Halo: Spartan Assault, Killer Instinct, Kinect Sports Rivals, Max: The Curse of Brotherhood, Project Spark, Ryse: Son of Rome, Super Time Force, Sunset Overdrive, Titanfall

#### WHAT TO WATCH

Charot, Crimson Dragon, Guacamelee! Super Turbo Championship Edition, Halo: Spartan Assault, Max: The Curse of the Brotherhood, Strike Suit Zero, Super Time Force, Volgar: the Viking

#### WHAT TO TRY

Below, Crackdown 3, Cuphead, Fable Legends, Gears of War series, Halo 5: Guardians, Inside, Neverwinter, On and the Binding of Isaac, Phantom Dust, Quantum Break, Scalebound

#### WHAT TO BUY

**Sunset Overdrive (\$349.99)** = Special edition all-white Xbox One and controller, plus a digital copy of the Insomniac Games' exclusive open-world shooter

**Call of Duty: Advanced Warfare (\$449.99)** = Custom look Xbox One console and controller, digital copy of Call of Duty: Advanced Warfare. Console features a larger 1 terabyte hard drive

**Assassin's Creed Unity (\$349.99)** = Standard black Xbox One console and controller, digital copy of Assassin's Creed Unity. A \$449.99 version includes the Kinect motion sensor in the bundle

**Madden NFL 15 (\$349.99)** = Standard black Xbox One console and controller, digital copy of Madden NFL 15

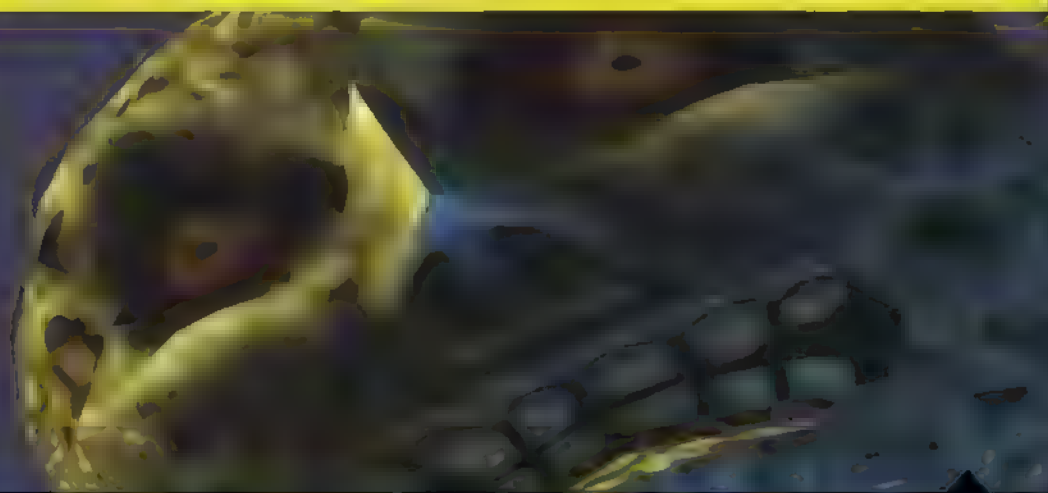
*\*\*Some retailers still have stock of previous bundles for Forza 5, Titanfall, and others*

#### WHAT TO SAY

Xbox One's solid controller wins accolades from us, but the system has been plagued by problems of resolution and incidents of the Xbox One versions performing worse than their PS4 counterparts. The company's all-in-one entertainment box plan also flopped; its original entertainment division was shuttered, the Xbox One menu interface is still a mess, and its cable TV integration (while it works well) hasn't been a selling point. Thankfully, the system finally received its long-awaited HBO Go app, which had been a notable omission, but it still lags far behind Roku devices in terms of streaming media app choices.



## The Good

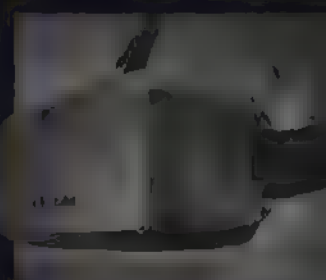


### THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: MAJORA'S MASK

is coming to the 3DS next spring. Nintendo hasn't revealed much about the remake, but series producer Eiji Aonuma says that the gameplay will be "smoother" than the N64 original from 2000.

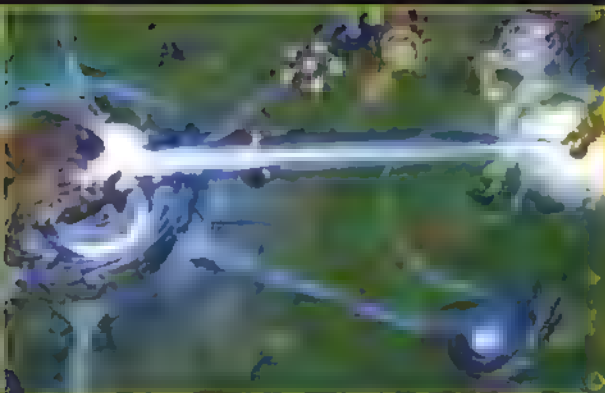
## Quotable

"We're getting very close. It's months, not years away, but many months."



Oculus VR CEO **Brandon Iriberto** at Web Summit 2014 on the timing of the VR headset's consumer model

## The Bad



**DAWNGATE**, Electronic Arts' free-to-play MOBA, is shutting down at the end of January after an 18-month beta. EA says that the game wasn't progressing the way the company hoped it would. Players who have spent money during the beta will get their money refunded, and developer Waystone Games is being disbanded. EA says it is trying to place the developers within its organization.

## The Ugly

**DYING LIGHT** (for last-gen consoles) and Human Head's version of Prey 2 have been canceled. Dying Light developer Techland says that the old systems couldn't handle what it wanted to do with the game, and Human Head's work on Prey 2 (shown) ends after three years of fitful development by the series' original developer.

This may simply be paving the way for the official announcement of Arkane Studios' work on Prey 2. The Dishonored developer's involvement in the project was revealed in a leaked email obtained by *Kotaku* in 2013, and although Arkane was not mentioned, recently Bethesda's VP of PR and marketing Pete Hines said, "It's a franchise we still believe we can do something with—we just need to see what that something is."







# **BlizzCon's Big Surprise**

*Blizzard  
tackles the  
team shooter*





**I**t has been 17 years since Blizzard added a new IP to the hallowed ranks of established PC franchises like StarCraft, Warcraft, and Diablo. At this year's BlizzCon, the audience was given unprecedented access to the surprise announcement of Overwatch. Attendees were treated to a cinematic trailer, gameplay trailer, and (unexpectedly) plenty of hands-on time with the title itself. Not only is Blizzard taking on one of the most popular game genres out there (and one of the most conspicuously missing in its roster of Battle.net titles) with Overwatch, but things are also moving fast; the beta is scheduled to roll out next year.

by Daniel Tack

In Overwatch, Blizzard takes things to a fantastical future for a 6v6 team-based shooter, with disparate characters that all play completely different from one another. In this genre, characters are often defined by the weapon they wield, but in Blizzard's take on things special abilities play a major role alongside class-defining weapons — this fleshes out the characters and combines with bubbling personalities to create something special.

"Hearing the game compared to Team Fortress 2 is the ultimate form of flattery. That game is one of the most revered games at Blizzard," says Jeffrey Kaplan, game director on Overwatch. "I think it's obvious where the similarities are, but I don't think the differences become quite clear until you start playing the game. In Overwatch, you want every ability to be as cool as the gun you have."

When you're Widowmaker, you'll feel like a sly assassin, grappling to forbidden areas to get eyes on your victims, setting poison traps, and using your understated-but-powerful ultimate ability to provide perfect vision to your entire team. Or

perhaps you're the embodiment of evil doom with Reaper, whose stealthy shotgun-style play can burst a player down in moments or unleash area-of-effect destruction on a protected capture point with his ultimate ability. Maybe you're on defense and opt for the turret-turret gameplay of Torbjörn or the "living tower" style of Bastion. Making a push on that heavily defended capture point? Back up your team with Mercy and execute a mass resurrection on your fallen comrades after the initial charge, forcing your opponents to defeat your entire team twice.

Blizzard's focus on accessibility is evident here, as it's almost painless to change classes and have a grasp of your basic abilities and weapon instantly. As you play through a match or two, you learn new and interesting ways to use those abilities to greater effect and in different situations. There's plenty of room for skill and team play to come into the equation, but sitting down with a new character is remarkably easy to do.

Characters are loosely divided into categories like offense, defense, tank, and support, but many can be used in roles

outside of their set category, like playing Widowmaker offensively or making Bastion's stationary hunker-down power a mobile nightmare during a payload delivery map. There's no limit to how many of each character can be on a team, so if everyone wants to play a snipe-squad consisting of Hanzo and Widowmakers, you can — but be aware that a Reinhardt on the other team will likely cause you some serious problems with his energy shield. Players can swap characters in the middle of a match with ease to deal with threatening class combinations, making each match fluid as teams swap characters in and out as necessary.

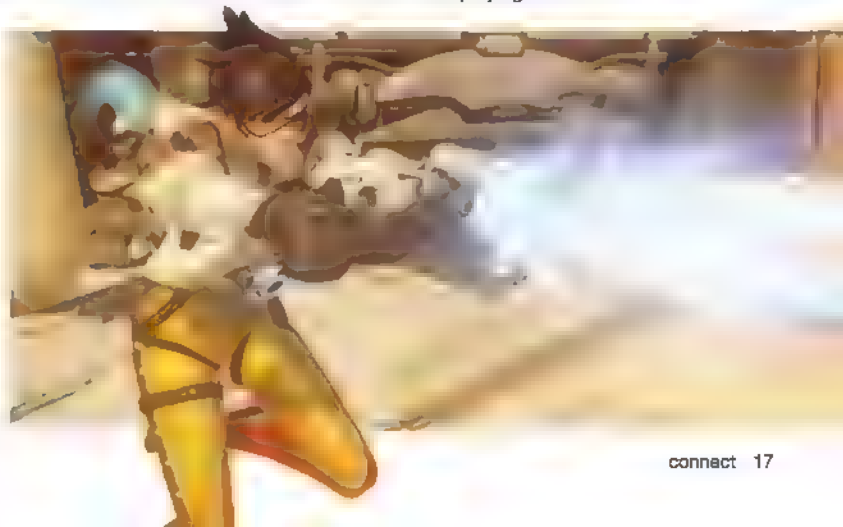
"What's important to us is making sure each hero is unique, distinct — you fall in love with it, you want to play as that one," says Kaplan. "I want a poster of that one on my wall, I want to be that one when I grow up; that's what is really important to us. If that means we add five more, so be it. If that means we add 800 more, that sounds awesome too."

Gunplay is fast, furious, and precise, with combat lasting mere moments from start to finish in many situations. From a lethal sniper shot to a brutal Reinhardt pin-charge, death is doled out with speed in situations where support characters are not present. This ends up working out fairly well, since the respawn time is minimal — around five seconds before

you're up and in the action again. Ultimate abilities charge up as players dish out and receive damage; those with lesser impact charge faster, while team-wiping ultimates take longer.

Bringing ultimate abilities into the team shooter sphere also makes the approach to objectives interesting, with players able to clear out masses of huddled defenders or plow through using potent support skills. If you're a twitch player looking to land your headshots and blitz around the battlefield, there are characters for you. If you're not a traditional FPS player that still wants to make a big difference, there are characters you can play that require little to no twitch-style gameplay at all. Again, it comes down to the diverse roster of characters handling each map and encounter differently. There will be progression elements to the game, but character loadouts will not be customizable; each is locked to their defining set of abilities and weapons.

"Matchmaking is key to us," Kaplan says. "Skill-based matchmaking is important, we don't want players getting crushed. Without getting into specifics, something we want to pursue for this game is, is there more we can do on the social front for matchmaking, like maybe these are some people that you seem to be having a positive experience with while playing." ♦







# Here Come The Amiibos!

*Nintendo's toy/game crossovers are out now, but are they worth buying?*

Nintendo fans have long been able to decorate their rooms with memorabilia featuring their favorite characters, but there's been a dividing line between that tchotchke and the games that inspired it. That's changing with the company's new Amiibo toys. These figurines use the same basic tech as the toy/game hybrids that preceded them, but Nintendo has something up on its competition. Unlike the toys from Skylanders and Disney Infinity, Amiibos work across several different game franchises. For instance, you can use your Mario Amiibo with Super Smash Bros. for Wii U and Mario Kart 8. It's an interesting idea, but does it work well? We've tested them out with two games, and here are our findings. *by Jeff Cork*

**Super Smash Bros. For Wii U**  
Smash Bros. is the flagship game for the first line of Amiibo figures. The toys look like the series' trophies, right down to the logo on their stands. Getting an Amiibo into your game is a simple process, and it's similar across various titles. After visiting a special menu option in the game, you simply hold the figure's base against the bottom-left side of the Wii U gamepad, where it's detected by the built-in NFC reader. (Collectors, take note: A foil shield is glued inside

the packaging, so you're going to have to open 'em up to get your Amiibos in the game.) From there, you give your Amiibo a nickname and customize it in the game, as you do with other custom characters. You don't get to play as your Amiibo counterpart; it's an A.I. that becomes a better fighter as it levels up in battle, earning you coins and presents along the way. It's a clever way to add personality to the GPU-controlled characters you might ordinarily smash with. You can also pit your Amiibo

against a friend's to see who fares better, or fight beside them in team battles.

**Mario Kart 8**  
Mario Kart 8's use of Amiibos shows another approach. Unlike Smash Bros., which saves progress on the figure, think of this as a token that you can use to grab additional costumes for your Mii racer. Placing the corresponding figure on the gamepad unlocks special suits for your driver. It's not as ambitious as Smash, but it's a fun way to add a little something extra for people who have picked up an Amiibo. Not every Amiibo works with Mario Kart 8, unlike with Smash. Mario, Luigi, Yoshi, Peach, Donkey Kong, Link, Kirby, Captain Falcon, Samus, and Fox are compatible with the game.

**What's Next?**  
The first wave of 12 Amiibo figures hit shelves on November 21, just in time for Super Smash Bros., and two additional waves will bring the complete roster up to 29 figures by February. At \$12.99 a pop, that could end up being a significant investment for superfans. Even though they might not look as detailed as the concept Amiibos Nintendo debuted at E3, they're still attractive and stack up favorably against the competition. Considering many of us have already spent similar amounts on figures of our favorite characters that don't do anything but look cool, it's a fair deal. ♦



## What Games Will Support Them?

Here are the Wii U titles that Nintendo says will include Amiibo support:

- Captain Toad: Treasure Tracker
- Hyrule Warriors
- Kirby and the Rainbow Curse
- Mario Kart 8
- Mario Party 10
- Super Smash Bros. for Wii U
- Yoshi's Woolly World

Nintendo 3DS support is coming in 2015, via an external NFC pad. These games are planned to support Amiibos:

- Ace Combat: Assault Horizon Legacy Plus
- Super Smash Bros. for Nintendo 3DS

## Who's Out, Who's Coming?



**Nov. 21**  
Animal Crossing Villager, Donkey Kong, Fox, Kirby, Link, Mario, Marth, Peach, Pikachu, Samus Aran, Wii Fit Trainer, Yoshi



**December**  
Captain Falcon, Diddy Kong, Little Mac, Luigi, Pit, Rosalina and Luma, Zelda



**February 2015**  
Bowser, Ike, King Dedede, Lucario, Mega Man, Meta Knight, Sheik, Shulk, Sonic, Toon Link



# Alien Races



## Metroids - Metroid series

When it comes to strange, unfamiliar, and incredible, Metroid's namesake species is truly alien. These parasitic energy vampires are a rare sight throughout Samus' adventures, but when they finally appear they pose an immediate and real danger. Little is known about these enigmatic creatures other than the fact that they were bioengineered for combat by the ancient Chozo race. Unfortunately for Samus, they're good at their job.



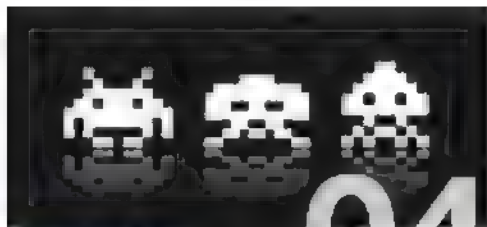
## Krogans - Mass Effect series

The planet Tuchanka is a playground of unforgiving biomes and home to some of the deadliest predators in the universe, but the war-hungry Krogan thrived there for millennia, breeding like bored rabbits until a genetically modified retrovirus sterilized their females. Still, these aggressive reptilian bipeds remain as imposing as they are inspiring.



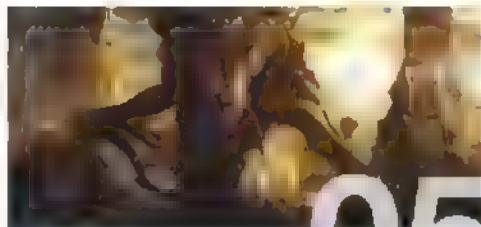
## Quarians - Mass Effect series

The Quarians are a highly advanced engineering society, but after being exiled from their home planet by a race of synthetic creatures they created, the Quarians are forced to drift through the stars on a flotilla of salvaged ships and repurposed technology. Centuries of breathing recycled air has muted their immune systems and forced them into personal hazmat suits.



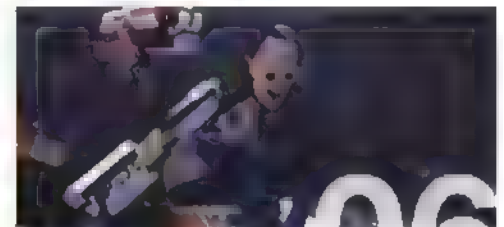
## Space Invaders - Space Invaders

Space Invaders do little more than shift from side to side as they scroll down a screen, but Taito's 1978 arcade hit helped expand the gaming industry from a novelty amusement into a worldwide industry. The pixelated aliens themselves are so iconic that they have essentially become pop-culture shorthand for retro gaming.



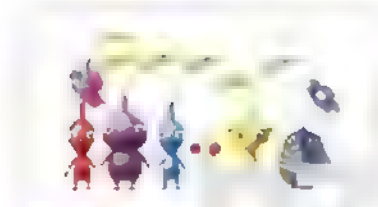
## Zerg - StarCraft series

Obsessed with the ideal of a perfect race, the Zerg hunt down advanced species across the galaxy and incorporate their DNA into a genetic melting pot. Dominated by an ancient brain called the Overmind, the Zerg will stop at nothing to consume the galaxy and bring it under their rule.



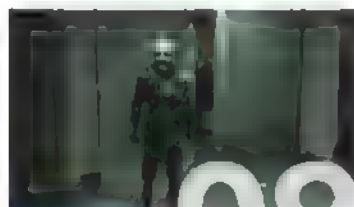
## Thin Men - XCOM: Enemy Unknown

Some aliens seek to overthrow humanity through technological or military might; others take a craftier approach. Thin Men may look like well-tailored businessmen with decent verticals, but if you take a closer look, you realize that their entire facade is a mask and a poison-spewing monster can be seen poking through the seams.



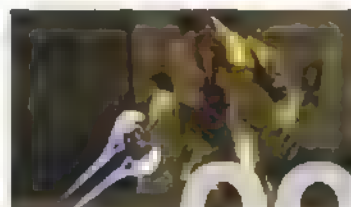
## Pikmin - Pikmin series

Not all aliens have to be serious threats to human survival; some can be friendly, even helpful. Some of the docile plant-animal life forms of planet PNF-404 are immune to fire, while others can breathe underwater, but their compliant nature and big doe eyes make us want to do little more than hug them.



## Combine - Half-Life 2

Posing as humanity's benefactors, the Combine took over the known world and imposed an oppressive rule. With an empire spread across several parallel worlds, no one knows who leads the organization. It has used its formidable technology to create armies of super-soldiers to ensure it stays that way.



## Sangheili - Halo series

The Covenant is known as the "race" at humanity's throat in the Halo series, but it is really a collection of several species. The Sangheili are the most recognizable branch in this hegemony. Proud, strong, and intelligent, the Sangheili have proven formidable foes for Earth's Spartan army.



## Malians - Perfect Dark series

Rare's take on the stereotypical "greys" from alien-abduction folklore was both surprising and amusing. Not only can these aliens live for centuries, but they are an ideal choice for anyone looking to cheese Perfect Dark's multi-player, because they are so short that bullets whiz over their heads.





## Super Smash Bros. 2014 Tournament Winner

**S**am Buzby, better known as "Dabuz" around Super Smash Bros. tournament circles, has been playing the game since he was six years old. He started with the original on Nintendo 64, training mostly against the computer, and began entering tournaments and competing at a professional level shortly into Brawl's lifespan. Recently, Stewart took home the top prize at the Nintendo Super Smash Bros. 3DS National Open Tournament, and we spoke to him about taking on the competition and his thoughts on the latest entry in the Super Smash Bros. franchise.



**Sam  
"Dabuz"  
Buzby**

**Occupation**  
Finance student  
at Baruch College

**Twitter**  
@BuzSensei

**Location**  
New York

by Kyle Hilliard

### Were you confident going into the tournament?

There's the regionals before the nationals, and I was very unconfident about it because it's free-for-all. But when I got to the national tournament - the 1v1s - I felt pretty confident. There were a few players I was worried about. I was worried about the random stages and the Final Smashes, but overall I was thinking I could win that. Confidence is a huge factor in winning tournaments - if you're not confident, you are hurting yourself. Even if it's fake, just going in and thinking you can win a tournament is such a big deal and really helps a lot.

### What's the largest prize you've taken home from a tournament?

I used to enter the online tournaments run by Gamebattles for Brawl, and I won a couple that were worth \$3,000 each. That money actually paid my college for a semester or two.

### What do you think of the criticisms that say Super Smash Bros. isn't a fighting game?

Smash Bros. is a fighting game, but it's not technically a fighting

game. If you ask [Super Smash Bros. director Masahiro] Sakurai, he will say it's a platforming brawler or something like that. It is the same as a fighting game. It has the same mechanics - mix ups, reading people, spacing. It's not a standard fighting game, but it's a competitive game that should be treated as such, just in its own category.

### Do you dislike any of the new characters?

Duck Hunt Dog. I actually really don't like him. I don't really think Palutena is that good as well, but I think most of the characters are pretty decent. When I pick a character, I like to pick a character because I think they are cool, because I like the game they are in. I don't like picking characters because, "Oh this character is good. I'm going to use this character because of that." I like Duck Hunt the game, but the character to me is just a dog with a bird attached to it. I had no interest to play the character initially, and he's a very defensive character that has trouble killing. It's not fun to play a game of runaway until someone is at 100

percent so you can kill them. I like playing more aggressively.

### Which Super Smash Bros. entry is your favorite?

I'd say Brawl. I just have so many good memories of playing Brawl. When my friends played that game I felt like it was the perfect game, and to this day it's still such a fun game to play casually with friends. It's definitely not a common thing, choosing Brawl over Melee. A lot of people I know actually think it is their least favorite, but I don't know... playing that

game, playing Olimar, Zero Suit Samus - all of those characters - I just had so much fun.

### How do you feel about items?

They're fun, but I don't want to play with them in any competitive setting. I'll play them with friends, don't get me wrong, I do love items - bob-ombs and stuff - but just leave 'em out of my tournaments, please. ♦

*At the time of this interview, Dabuz' online record in 1v1 For Glory Mode on 3DS was 163 wins and 13 losses.*





# DRAGON AGE: INQUISITION

After a bit of an identity crisis, Dragon Age is back with a huge world, tons of quests, and fantastic characters. Inquisition isn't just a step up for this series – it's a landmark RPG in general, and we talked to creative director Mike Laidlaw about how BioWare approached this massive undertaking. *by Joe Juba*

**You had significantly more time to develop Inquisition than Dragon Age II. What benefit did that extra time give you?**

There's two big elements. The first one is everything had longer to cook. You need time for the idea to take root and say, "I thought we put that one to bed a month ago, but now we can do something better since we've learned X about Y." You have more insight and more opportunity for – almost serendipity.

The other thing is that we had a unique challenge in switching tech, which is a big part of why it took so long...we almost had to build the pipeline before we could start piping stuff through it. That creates a different atmosphere. At the same time, it means that you're able to engineer stuff from the ground up. You can start planning from the beginning instead of retrofitting to something that was already complete.

**When a certain significant piece of DLC for a prior entry was first being developed, did you know how it would factor into this installment?**

We tend to think about all the content we make as our continuum. We do things and reveal stuff about the world that makes it possible to continue happening. If we want to go to certain wells for the future, we can. That's been our approach to the whole darn thing.

**Players have a lot of romance options, but Leliana isn't one of them. Is that tied to the fact that she was an option in Origins?**

Yeah, a general rule is that we don't want to put the player in a situation where they are cheating on themselves.

**Skyhold becomes the base of**

**operations for the Inquisition, but doesn't unlock until the main plot is well under way. Why wait so long to introduce it?**

I think you tend to value something you've earned more than something you didn't. We experimented with where you should become Inquisitor. We did an early story pass where you became Inquisitor quite early, and got Skyhold quite early. It felt totally flat. As the Inquisitor, by the time you get there – here's your castle, you just led your people out of the dark in a kind of Orphean experience – you feel like you've earned it.

We also wanted added complexity that came in at the mid point of the game.... Here's specializations, here's masterwork crafting, here's enchanting. It creates an additional layer of complexity. I think if we had tried to pile that on at the beginning as well, it would have been even more overwhelming, because there's a lot going on in the game, and I wanted it to pace itself out naturally.

**Closing the breach seems to be the main focus for the early part of the game, but the culmination of that thread is handled with a relatively brief cutscene. With all the build-up to that moment, why not spend more time on the event itself?**

We always try different revisions, but the problem was that it created this strange sense of delay. "I've just reached this moment, I've recruited the Templars or mages, and I've been through a fairly harrowing plot. I feel like I finally earned the ability to close the breach... and now we're going to have more discussions and challenges and so on to close the breach." It slowed things down... We wanted to celebrate those

things. I recognize it's fairly quick; the point we were trying to get across is that your Inquisition got things under control in Haven – they just needed one more push to bring things home.

**Why did you opt not to include a storage chest to hold extra or over-leveled items?**

People were intrigued by having storage, but there weren't all many uses for it – other than the very endgame where people had built multiple suits of armor and so on. But they tend to have those equipped. The case for it wasn't strong enough to have it implemented. I think there's still value to it – it may be something we look at in the future. But essentially, when you're rebuilding everything from the ground up, you have to prioritize.

My general approach is that Inquisition is kind of a new foundation, because it's new tech, and we intend to be using this for a while – because I really don't want to rebuild it all again. So, ideally, it's something we can continue to grow.

**Can you tell us about anything that was cut or changed during development?**

One thing we experimented with early on (and just because we didn't do it doesn't mean we won't do some variation on it in the future) was that originally collecting materials wasn't something you did manually. We did some experimentation with the idea that you could almost deploy Inquisition troops to an area, and it was almost like the Mass Effect planet scanning minigame. "Here's a good spot with good concentrations," that kind of stuff. It felt neat, but it wasn't fun.... We eventually

abandoned it and realized there is a satisfaction to going hands-on and doing it yourself.

**Lots of fans were happy to hear about the lack of day-one DLC for Inquisition (since both Origins and DA2 had it). How did that decision come about?**

The game itself we knew was going to be more than big enough to bring it home. Adding "Here's an entirely different product, which itself has 10 different variations, which we also have to test and certify," was going to put the core game at risk. Everything you do to divert your attention lowers the potential quality of the core game. It's probably fairly clear that we decided, right from the outset, that we were going to make the core experience as amazing as possible. Regardless of development realities, day-one DLC looks like it was cut out of the main game. There's some negative optics on it, and that's something I didn't want muddying the conversation, but it's also something that we didn't want potentially diverting focus from delivering that core product.

**Inquisition seems to tie up many of the lingering loose ends from previous installments. Was there any concern about over-spending your narrative capital for future entries?**

I don't think so. The way I tend to think about Inquisition is that it's roughly the end of the Chantry part of the arc; it explores in relative completeness the different variations of the Chantry and the mage/Templar struggle, and so on. And I think it does a pretty good job of letting the player say, "No, this is how I think it should be." And that's very satisfying, but I work under "The Map," right? I have it up on the wall, because it's a reminder. We haven't been to Nevarra. We haven't even touched on the Qun. No one's been to Rivain. No one's been to Antiva. No one's been to Tevinter. There are all these amazing places we could go still



## World Of Warcraft: Warlords Of Draenor

*Better gnomes and garrisons*



**W**orld of Warcraft's latest expansion falls on the 10-year anniversary of the MMORPG, and distinguishes itself by being both immediately accessible for newcomers while providing plenty of depth and content for grizzled veterans. Warlords of Draenor succeeds at offering a slew of content options on the way to level 100 and beyond, and could be the best expansion we've seen since the Burning Crusade.

In Warlords of Draenor, we explore an alternative universe, essentially a reimagining of Outland, the zones associated with the Burning Crusade expansion. Because we're dealing with dimensional rifts and alternative history, we're able to see and interact with tons of high-profile characters in the Warcraft universe in both the overworld and dungeons—Khadgar, Ner'zhul, Gul'dan, Cho'gall, Orgrim Doomhammer, and Grom Hellscream himself. The Iron Horde serves as the primary antagonist as you explore reimagined zones, from a siege of Shattrath City to a deep dive into the origins of Skettis. Yes, you might even have a chance to create a better future for Barrens favorite Man'rik in this weird take on the world.

If you've never played WoW or haven't touched it in years, Warlords of Draenor has you covered. Each copy of the expansion comes with a level 90 character boost complete with a full set of gear and a brief tutorial to get you working with your core abilities. The introductory zone Tanaan Jungle gets you caught up to speed with where we're at in the story, introducing critical characters and major players in a 30-minute segment. If you weren't a fan of Cataclysm or the punchy pandas of Mists of Pandaria, Warlords of Draenor is an absolute return to form, tapping into Warcraft's most powerful personalities and exploring the darker side.

Once you complete your warm welcome to Warlords, you're off constructing the Garrison,

your new home. This structure contains many of the new elements in the expansion, allowing you to recruit and gear up a roster of followers ranging from Arma warriors to Hearthstone players, fend off invasions for rewards, augment or supercharge your crafting abilities, and give you new options for travel. You have to make choices along the way as you're only allotted a certain amount of building space and it's up to the player to determine how much they want to engage with the minigame-driven Garrison, but it's far and away the most enticing feature of the expansion. While you're free to ignore it completely after getting it set up, almost all of the classic systems in WoW get new incentives and fun by being linked into Garrison structures and systems, from picking up dungeon quests and followers at the tavern to hoarding materials and picking up perks from crafting buildings.

Many Garrison functions operate in the background, so when you're coming back from the field after completing a set of quests or a dungeon you can take a quick stroll to pick up new goodies and send your army out on missions for experience, gold, and even high-level loot as your legions level up and acquire gear. There's a special feeling as you complete quest blocks in various zones and come home to see new things at your garrison based on your travels, from vendors to new quest options. These continually unlocking options should have players knocking out quests even after level cap. The

Garrison is an incredibly compelling option that gets more interesting as you progress, working as a persuasive side-game to the main show.

As far as questing goes, it's mostly standard fare: completing zones and moving ahead with the story, complete with cool cutscenes and cinematics at major points. A small feature that actually has a big impact is the "random upgrade" system involved with quest rewards. That green pair of boots might be randomly propelled to epic status when you turn it in (this chance can be upgraded with the War Mill building as well) and it keeps questing feeling fresh and addictive. Looping into this system is a huge supply of "rare" silver monsters and secret treasures all over Draenor. Keep an eye on your minimap at all times to tap these creatures for special loot—these are shared taps so you don't need to worry about fighting over them with other players. You can only get the rewards once, so there's no incentive to sit there and farm them. Your careful eye will be rewarded if you're the curious type; from special keys to burgeoning coffers of gold located deep under the sea, hundreds of special treasures wait for inquisitive players to find them. These systems combined with the garrison and solid questing make the leveling from 90-100 one of the best World of Warcraft experiences yet, a continually interesting path of loot and lore that never feels dull.

Warlords of Draenor handles a difficult task with style and success, allowing new and returning players to come back and dive immediately into the swing of things while providing satisfying content loops for level-capped players. While servers were plagued with issues during the first few launch days leaving some players unable to even log on to play, these problems seem to be resolved. There's a lot to do already, and the possibilities for moving forward with the Garrison backdrop are intriguing as we look ahead to content patches and raids. If you've never played World of Warcraft, this is probably the best entry point you could ask for. If you haven't played in a few years, it's an awesome time to come back. ♦



## Q-Games Explores Gaming Communism

by Matt Miller

**The Tomorrow Children** is a strange game. The latest project from the team that brought us the excellent PixelJunk series is an amalgam of building, combat, and online social experiment, with a healthy dose of Marxist philosophy thrown in the mix. After a couple of hours exploring the alpha, I'm still not sure exactly what I'm playing, but I'm fascinated by the grand ambition of the project.

An experiment goes horribly wrong in an alternate version of 1960s Russia, and as a result, humanity is driven to the brink of extinction. The world is left a blank, white void, and you are a human consciousness implanted into the cloned body of a little girl tasked with reviving civilization. Only the community can triumph over such horrible odds; the rights and property of the individual have no place in the monumental project to bring humanity back from the brink. Amid the Soviet era overtones to the visuals and audio, you and your fellow players set to work building a city in the void.

Communist ideals are certainly an odd subject for a game, but Q-Games is exploring the idea in some fascinating ways. As the game begins, I choose one of several classes

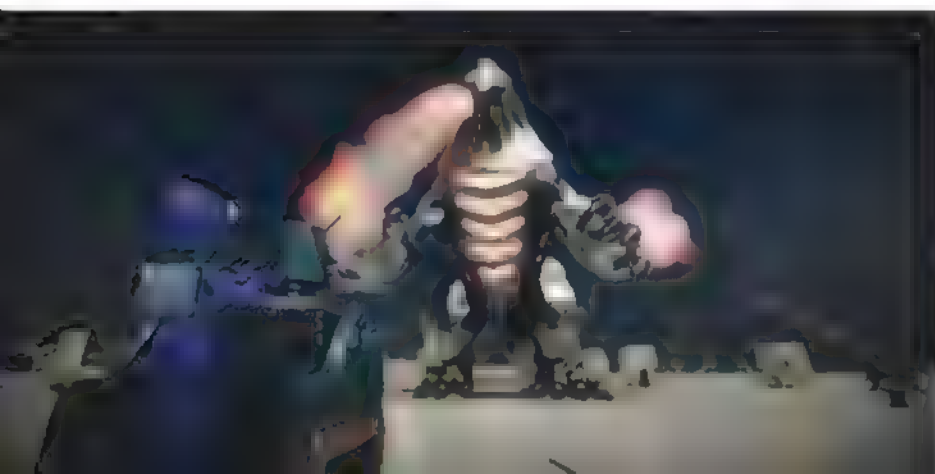
that guide the kind of work I want to focus on. For instance, miners are great at digging and resource transportation, where engineers are more capable at building things with the supplies that miners bring back. After choosing the citizen class (a well-rounded choice), I'm deposited in the center of a fledgling town—a paltry collection of buildings and machines in the middle of a vast white plain. From here, I can see other players who have been randomly assigned to this town as they move, and like, about their work—each choosing the way they contribute to the welfare of the state.

Gameplay is focused on one of three central tasks. By venturing away from the town, some players track down and explore islands filled with minerals to acquire Matroshka dolls, which can be hauled back to town and transformed into revived humans to populate the town. Other players engage in the secondary task of taking recovered resources and building up the town. That might take the form of crafting tools, new facilities, and vehicles, or simply running on a treadmill in a simple min game to generate the electricity needed to power everything

Meanwhile, a third group of workers ensures the burgeoning village is protected from terrifying monsters called Izvergs. Whether they look like giant spiders or shambling Godzilla beasts, these creatures threaten the state, and you need to build artillery batteries or equip weapons like rocket launchers and jet packs to defend against the threat.

The most unusual aspect of *The Tomorrow Children* is that everything is shared. Other than the personal tools you carry in your inventory, the product of your work is available to all the other random players who happen to be part of your town. You may be the citizen who brings crystals back from the corpse of a destroyed monster, but someone else will likely use those crystals in a task of their own devising. Your only personal reward comes when you stop working and head to the local ministry of labor, where all your work has been catalogued, and you're provided ration coupons which can be used to acquire additional and better tools to continue your personal contribution to the community. Alternately, if you choose, you can simply laze around town and refuse to help out.

*The Tomorrow Children's* subversive endorsement of Soviet community practices is tongue-in-cheek; there's an amusing silliness and self-awareness about the futility of it all, and in the way the story suggests the same practices that nearly destroyed civilization can now be used to rebuild it. From a gameplay angle, *The Tomorrow Children* draws on games like *Minecraft*, but adds a touch of MMO housing and community practices, as well as an odd twist on RPG leveling—the progression of a communal town rather than an individual hero. My playtime only showed off the very beginnings of a town, with only a few contributors present. I can't tell yet if the whole weird experience will be great fun, but I can confidently state *The Tomorrow Children* is different from anything else out there. ♦

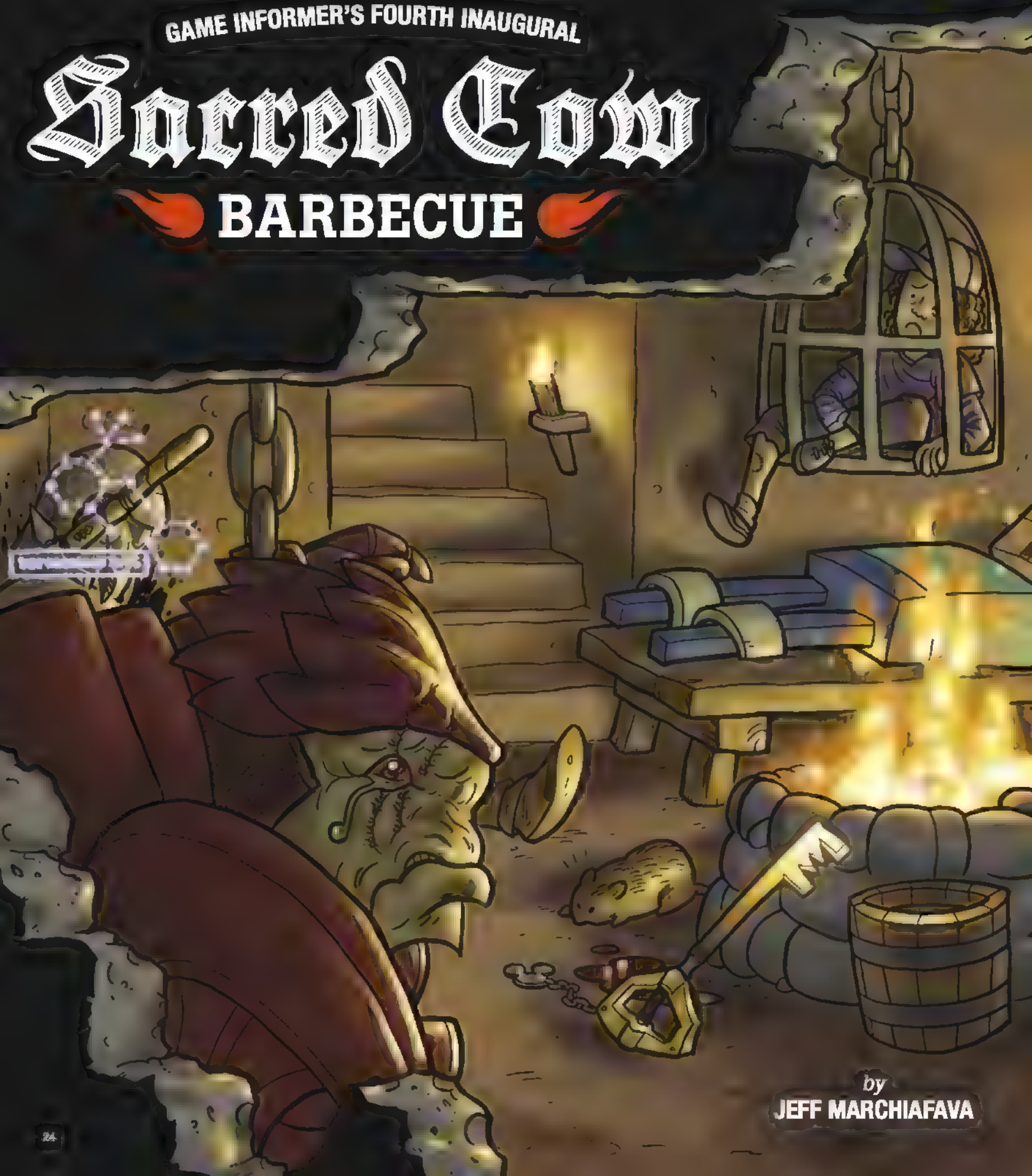




GAME INFORMER'S FOURTH INAUGURAL

# Sacred Cow

BARBECUE



by  
**JEFF MARCHIAFAVA**

With a new generation of consoles, the rise of indie development, and Kickstarter giving washed-up developers a platform to beg for funding, we live in a golden age of gaming. With every golden age comes its herd of sacred cows—games so deeply loved and admired that they've been deemed immune to criticism by the gaming public. Fortunately, we don't stand on ceremony, and we can't pass up the opportunity to grill some critical darlings—especially when they're this awful.





## KINGDOM HEARTS

Square Enix floundered with Final Fantasy all last generation, failing to find a modern take on the series that satisfied longtime fans. Luckily, that's not a problem for Kingdom Hearts, because this Disney-fied moron-a-thon appeals exclusively to adult gamers who are too emotionally stunted to be discerning, and that's saying a lot for JRPG fans.

Each iteration serves up the same brilliant recipe of rot garbage: You start with a list of every has-been Disney character you can think of — losers that no one under the age of 20 even remembers, like Donald Duck and Goofy. Then you pick a series of movie-inspired locations too lame for their own Disney World ride, and tie all the disparate elements together with some garbled nonsense about a Keyblade. The final touch: Give it the dumbest name you can think of (Dream Drop Distance, anyone?), and call it a day. This winning formula has sold over 20 million copies of the series worldwide, proving that while you can't pollute a herd, if you slap a pair of Mickey Mouse ears on it, you're golden.

Square Enix has relegated Kingdom Hearts to handheld installments and regurgitated remakes for the better part of a decade, while stringing their fans along with promises of a Kingdom Hearts 3. Our guess is the company is just waiting for Disney to dream up some more insane mascots to shoehorn into the sequel, because — as Sora and Riku aptly demonstrate — Square Enix is incapable of creating an original character that isn't a generic, spiky-haired anime dweeb.

## MINECRAFT

Minecraft's surreal success is a prime example that gamers are willing to buy anything — and will keep on purchasing it as long as Mojang continues to port it out onto new platforms. Minecraft is continually praised for its boundless creativity, because it allows you to pick up blocks and then stack those blocks on other blocks. News flash: This game has been around forever; it's called Lego, and the graphics are better. Still, that hasn't stopped gamers from spending literally years of their lives meticulously recreating every fantasy nerd location you can think of, from a 1:1 scale replica of the U.S.S. Enterprise to the entire freaking continent of Westeros. Too bad Minecraft doesn't include a minor block type, so these hopeless noopes could take a good long look at what they're doing with their lives.

Minecraft contains no story, no characters (sorry, Minecraft Steve, but the exploding green donges have more personality than you do), visuals that only an optometrist could love, and gameplay that's more monotonous than working in a UPS warehouse — clearly, this is a franchise that's worth \$2.5 billion. We don't know who the bigger suckers are: Microsoft for blowing its war chest on an aimless stacking simulator and its one-hit wonder studio (which now lacks its top "talent" or gamers for rebuying unpeppen versions of this crap — not to mention playing it).





## DARK SOULS

Gamers have been gleefully declaring the Japanese game industry dead for years due to the inability of eastern developers to create new and innovative experiences (i.e., make first-person shooters like everyone else). However, From Software has managed to revolutionize gaming with its Dark Souls series – not by introducing new gameplay (it's the same slow, stat-trading combat the developer has been shoveling for years) or a thought-provoking story (this is From Software we're talking about), but by tapping into the self-hatred that introverted gamers have for themselves in a way no game has done before.

Dark Souls is the ultimate pissing contest, only in this case, the objective is to see how long you're willing to let the game shower you in its archaically punishing gameplay. Players undergo a symbolic form of castration by repeatedly dying and losing all of their experience until Stockholm syndrome sets in and provides a numbing sense of elitism that can sometimes be mistaken for having fun. This grueling "difficulty" also masks the fact that From Software can't balance a game or even explain how its draconian mechanics work – because fumbling around in menus and not understanding basic gameplay systems is part of the experience. Somehow the developer has actually duped players into expecting and paying for a miserable experience, which From Software is uniquely qualified to deliver.

Playing and pretending to enjoy Dark Souls is the gaming equivalent of a middle-aged dad driving an exotic sports car – it's so clear that you're trying to compensate for your own inadequacies that we can only pity you.

## MASS EFFECT 2

The Mass Effect series was the gaming industry's darling RPG franchise for an entire generation – right up until the last 10 minutes of Mass Effect 3, anyway, when BioWare spat in the faces of its fans and betrayed everything they loved about the sci-fi masterpiece. At least that's what Mass Effect fans keep telling us, but we still don't see how the half-baked finale is any different from the rest of the series.

Mass Effect 2 is still regarded as the high point in the series' storytelling, because *The Empire Strikes Back* has conditioned sci-fi nerds to believe the second entry in a trilogy is always the best. However, its story plays out like the hastily scribbled first draft of a George Lucas screenplay. The game starts with Commander Shepard dying and being resurrected – because BioWare knows the value of an understated opening. You then spend the next 30 hours running through linear shooting galleries and visiting sterile NPC hangouts to recruit potential side partners for the *Normandy's* perpetual intergalactic key party, while tolerating the drastically dumbed down RPG elements that BioWare "streamlined" because they refuse to give fans more of what they want without first completely butchering the formula just to prove they can (see also: *Dragon Age II*).

Once you're done sowing your extraterrestrial oats, BioWare serves up a whopper of a finale: a horrendous, nonsensical boss fight against a giant human/robot reaper, followed by an ending sequence that – like Mass Effect 3's ending! – is exactly the same for everyone except for which of your crew members might end up dying. If you suck as much as this game does, even Shepard can die, which bars you from using that character in the sequel – because unlike the beginning of the game, death is now permanent for some reason. In that case, you simply start a new Shepard for Mass Effect 3, which makes perfect sense if you can't be bothered to come up with a reasonable narrative solution to the conundrum you painted yourself into.

Let's face it: The Mass Effect series is popular because it offers players a slightly less embarrassing alternative to LARPing; strip out the pathetic romance fantasies and basic human-versus-machine plot and you're left with little more than a somewhat capable shooter. But hey, at least Mass Effect 2 added that blithering mineral-scanning minigame, right?



## DEAD SPACE

How do you totally rip off *Alien* without appearing to totally rip off *Alien*? That was the dilemma Visceral Games faced when making *Dead Space*, and after what we can only assume was 30 seconds of brainstorming, the developer went with the de facto video game solution to everything: Add zombies!

*Dead Space* was heralded as a revitalization of survival horror, a genre traditionally plagued by tank controls, backtracking, tedious inventory management, and stories so bad they make even the worst Syfy made-for-TV movie look like *Citizen Kane*. In short, the bar is so low that a limbless necromorph could flop over it, and yet *Dead Space* goes to great pains not to fix too many of the genre's obvious shortcomings.

*Dead Space*'s story revolves around mute engineer Isaac Clarke, who is inexplicably put in charge of doing everything himself even though he's only armed with a plasma cutter — a.k.a. the only interesting gun in the game. The *Alien* "inspirations" burst forth from every one of *Dead Space*'s striking cavities. The tense, isolated atmosphere; the doomed mining vessel stranded in outer space; the reluctant engineer-turned-hero — Visceral has created what may be the first "green" game by recycling all of its elements from other, more impressive properties.

To its credit, *Dead Space* does pack plenty of scares — the kind of unbelievably cheap jump scares usually accompanied by the stock sound effect of a cat screeching. In a display of true artistry, Visceral replaced the much-detested monster closets of yesteryear with innovative new monster vents — and you'll never guess what happens when you turn your back on one! You're also in for a big surprise on the dozen occasions when you walk into a large room that's clearly designed for an ambush and are prompted to activate a computer — the only thing we didn't see coming in this mundane and repetitive slog was the atrociously awful asteroid-shooting minigame.

The only halfway-decent thing about *Dead Space* is its satisfying head-slamming animation, which led us to clomping through the entire game like a toddler throwing a temper tantrum — a perfectly reasonable reaction for anyone forced to play this steaming dud.

## UNCHARTED 2: AMONG THIEVES

Someone really needs to tell Naughty Dog that the video game industry already has its blatant Indiana Jones clone — her name is Lara Croft, and she's been serving up unimaginative puzzles and clunky shooting mechanics for nearly two decades. Apparently, Tomb Raider wasn't enough of a direct rip-off, however, so Naughty Dog went ahead and innovated on the archaic formula by turning the protagonist back into a man.

And what a wonderfully white-bread protagonist Nathan Drake is! From his casual half-tuck demeanor to his lighthearted banter with Elena Fisher, Drake is as inoffensive and boring as a middle-school spelling bee. He's the perfect lead for a series that delivers a bland buffet of stale gunfights, overly scripted complete-it-or-repeat-it set piece moments, and mindless puzzles that are too easy for the back page of *Highlights* magazine.

A mythical treasure lies at the heart of each *Uncharted* installment, but the true mystery of the series permeates the minute-to-minute gameplay. *Uncharted* raises countless questions, like: If I'm going to spend so much time shooting hordes of generic enemies, why does the gunplay suck so much? Why is Naughty Dog incapable of designing a puzzle that doesn't involve pushing a giant statue? Who thinks the third-act supernatural twist is a good idea? How could enough people have possibly played the throwaway multiplayer to justify including it in another sequel? Those questions are rhetorical, mind you — we already know there are no good answers to any of them.

We're randomly picking *Uncharted 2* as the "best" entry, because the game starts with Nathan Drake almost dying. The fact that he doesn't and you still have to play the rest of the game also makes it the worst.





## ASSASSIN'S CREED

amers have traversed thousands of wacky worlds and post-apocalyptic wastelands before, but few developers are courageous enough to ground their games in real-life historical locations and events. Even fewer developers are

courageous enough to take those elements of history and make a complete mockery of them in a gimmicky attempt to add depth to an overrated neck-stabbing simulator. For each entry in *Assassin's Creed*, Ubisoft Montreal meticulously recreates a handful of historic cities in exorbitating detail, and then decorates any significant figure unlucky enough to have lived in one of them during that time period. Leonardo Da Vinci has been transformed into a Kurt Cobain lookalike peddling hidden blade upgrades to a lothario *seesaw*. Paul Revere is a hollering buffoon hanging off the ass-end of Connor's horse during his renowned midnight ride. Buried in the extended lore of one of the hacking games that everyone hates, it's revealed that Mahatma Gandhi didn't use nonviolent civil disobedience to inspire India's independence movement, but rather a mind-control device called the Apple of Eden, which lies at the festering core of the series' convoluted sci-fi metanarrative.

Ultimately, however, the story serves as a cheap perfume to distract you from the wretched gameplay. The control scheme is paradoxically complex and simple, requiring you to hold in a half dozen buttons at the same time and hope the game correctly guesses what you're attempting to do. Maybe you'll run up the front of a building, or merely grab an adjacent ledge and hang off it like a limp noodle. Hell, you might even mount a nearby horse — anything is possible, except for what you're actually trying to do.

Rather than fix these wonky mechanics, Ubisoft has slowly added every conceivable minigame and side activity to the series to make you forget about the underlying problems; you still can't gracefully make your way down the side of a building, but you can play checkers now, so it's all good. Not even pirates managed to fix this increasingly buggy and directionless series — but we're sure Ubisoft's decision to start releasing two installments at a time will solve everything.

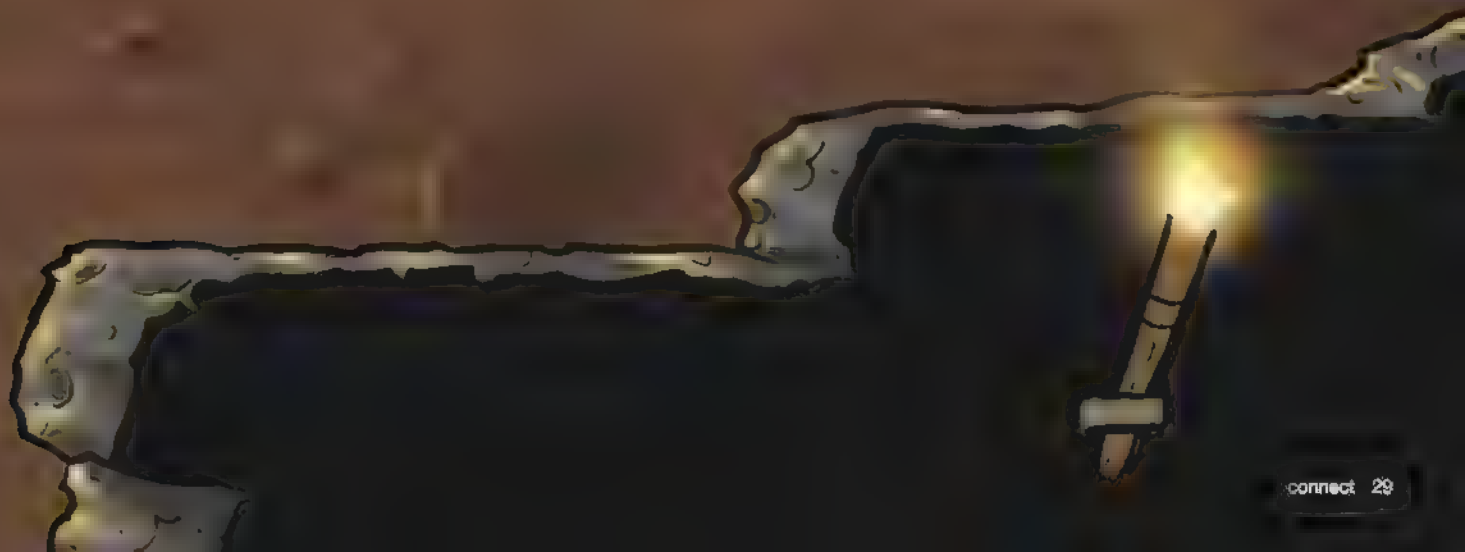
## TELLTALE'S THE WALKING DEAD

here's the thing: Everyone recognizes that Telltale's take on *The Walking Dead* doesn't really qualify as a game. That would require having actual gameplay and the endless parade of quirktime events and morose puzzles (like a *Dead* scratcher devoted to opening the panel on a radio and inserting batteries) are about as challenging and interactive as navigating the DVD menu of your favorite zombie movie. The general consensus is that as a game, *The Walking Dead* sucks, but as an exercise in interactive fiction, it's an unparalleled masterpiece. We guess that's true — if you're as brain dead as the series' shambling corpses.

Unfortunately, if you've ever seen *The Walking Dead* television show, comic book series, or any of the other endless zombie stories spawned by *Night of the Living Dead*, you'll realize Telltale's babysitting simulator is chewing on the same rotten guts as its predecessors. Watching a cast of disparate characters slowly die off while realizing that — gasp! — their fellow survivors are just as dangerous as the undead isn't new; it's literally the plot of every zombie story ever made. A little glint in a bloody baseball cap doesn't make it original.

That star of the game is Clementine, the squeaky-voiced tween you're tasked with protecting even though you're constantly putting her in dangerous situations. Find a locked door? "Hey, Clementine, why don't you climb through that window? Never mind the groaning noises — that's just the audience reacting to how stupidly contrived this situation is." The fact that Telltale constantly dangles Clementine's safety in front of players in order to keep them from dozing off should be considered like cheap and emotionally manipulative tactics, but gamers are too enamored with their glorified Tamagotchi to care about the developer's toothless threats of killing her off.

*The Walking Dead*'s greatest achievement is fooling players into thinking their choices mean something. Did you save Duck or Shawn? What about Carley or Doug? It doesn't matter, because sooner or later Telltale is going to kill off the remaining survivor to converge the narrative threads into a manageable number, saving a character only delays their inevitable demise, like a poorly animated version of *Final Destination* where the deaths aren't as entertaining and everyone suffers through the entire game because zombies are serious business. Eventually, gamers are going to see Telltale's squawkiest for what it is: a Choose Your Own Adventure novel that can't even be used for kindling when you realize how dreadful it is.







# Creating A Phenomenon

Toys for Bob, led by president and co-founder **Paul Reiche III**, took the once-moribund Spyro franchise and turned it into a billion-dollar property with Skylanders. We spoke to him about how it all happened, and where Toys for Bob is headed in the future.

interview by **Matt Helgeson**

## How did the idea for Skylanders come together? What's the origin story?

I love toys. Most everybody here has toys on their desk. In the same way that we hearken back to playing role-playing games, we also talk about what it was like to play with G.I. Joes. It's just part of the vocabulary of being a kid, and we often go there when we're being creative.

One day I got this random email from a lawyer that said, "If you have any patentable ideas, please send them to us. We like patents." It seemed like a funny email on the surface, and I thought, "Well, no one's gonna answer this," because it was a broadcast email. But I took some of the ideas we had been talking about, about wireless communication and toys, and structured it into a patent submission. You would use a toy as an avatar in the game and we would use RFID communication to recognize the toy and save its progress, its location, magic items, and so forth. I sent that off and that was the last I thought of it for a while. We were finishing up some of our Dreamworks games.

Then, one day, my then boss, Dave Stohl, said, "Hey, Paul. We merged with Vivendi, and the license we most want to bring back to life is Spyro." The follow-up statements were, "It has to be the most successful kids game pretty much ever, and it needs to be something entirely new. Not just a new Spyro game, but a new kind of game." That seemed really hard. A good challenge. We pitched all kinds of bad ideas. Skylanders was certainly not fully formed in our very first thoughts.

So, we were exploring all kinds of loony ideas involving glowing eggs and funny hats. Finally, we thought, "Wait a minute. There was that patent we submitted." [Laughs] We came back to it and said, "Oh, my God. This is great! This is exactly the right thing." The moment we got a toy with an RFID tag in it, registering, loading a character, and playing as a character—all within about three or four seconds—that was the magic.

## Did you have a hands-on role with designing any of the Skylanders characters?

I did. I have to credit the character designs to I-Wei [Huang, TFB character and toy director], because he actually does all the drawings and many of the ideas are his, as well. Over the past few years, I've had the wonderful job of spending mornings with him talking about monsters. "What if there was a monster that looked like this and had electricity coming out of its eyes and left a slime trail?" I-Wei would draw that and we'd say, "Oh, that looks horrible. What if it was a knight's armor full of fire that could leap out?" I-Wei would illustrate that, and it would be great. Some days he'd show up and say, "Hey, look what I drew last

night," and it would be Trigger Happy. Trigger Happy pretty much showed up fully formed one day from I-Wei's imagination. Across Skylanders Giants and Trap Team, I-Wei and I were the main concept illustrators.

We'd hand it off to the game designers, modelers, and animators, and they would really bring that to life. Sometimes, [Activision] would come to us with an envelope within which to work. Particularly as we were getting to the latter Skylanders in a year, they'd say, "We want an undead Skylander, we want it to be a girl, we want it to be on a kind of serious side." We'd have these various adjectives to hone in on.

## With the cost of producing toys, the expense of making something like Skylanders is a lot higher than a regular game. Were you nervous about the game when it came out?

Oh, sure. We knew it was fun. We knew that all of our testing was good, but still, the initial order was for something like 16 million toys. We said, "If this doesn't go well, this will fill our entire office when they ship it here." When it sold out very rapidly, we were like, "You really sold 16 million toys? Oh, my God." And then it just took off from there. Within about six weeks, the curve ramped up immediately. All of a sudden, we saw Penny Arcade cartoons and people were selling their toys for 500 Euros online. People started putting up fan websites. And then we ran out of toys. That may have been the secret, but it certainly wasn't our intention. There was a spike in toy prices on eBay. This metagame emerged—you and your kids going from store to store trying to find the toys you couldn't have. Lots of people thought we were clever enough to engineer that, but I swear, it really wasn't our intent. The moment we ran out, we were like, "Okay, let's duplicate a whole bunch more." But we were thinking in disc-burning terms and not in manufacturing terms—make something, hand paint it, put it in the boat and ship it over here. Real time passed between when they all sold out and when they started arriving again. Once we got them back, sales started going back up again.

## Was it harder coming into Trap Team to iterate on the series, and how does that become a challenge moving forward?

There are now two teams working on Skylanders. Vicarious Visions got great reviews on Swap Force. The innovation of changing a toy and seeing a change in the game is emblematic of what Skylanders is all about, which is making real-life toys appear magically in the game. Having seen that, it was a strong motivation to kick some ass and come up with something that was outside of everybody's expectations. You can come up with new categories of characters, new minigames and activities, but to reverse it and say, "Now I'm going to start stealing things out of Skylands: The power of the Porta-

Master goes two ways."

We have a really great creative writer, Alex Ness, and he's written most of the stuff that we've done.... I credit him for putting so much personality into those guys. They don't take themselves too seriously, and I think that's the pft; Skylanders is kind of a crazy and insane world. I love that, while everyone has an intent, there's a sort of playfulness or ridiculousness in almost everybody.

## What was your reaction when you saw Disney Infinity and Nintendo's Amiibo figures?

It was interesting. Anytime you do something really successful and new, it's inevitable that people are going to want to share in that fun and, hopefully, add to it. Being on the receiving end of it is a new experience for me. As long as people are doing a good job and adding to the fun that's out there, I can really respect that. I'm actually pretty excited about what Nintendo's doing with their Amiibos. They do such high-quality work as a general rule. I'm fascinated, as a fan, to see what happens with that. I'm not entirely sure I know all the details yet, but they're nice toys. I probably shouldn't be complimenting someone who could be perceived as a competitor, but we collaborate with them so much. They've supported us throughout the years.

At Disney, they have a lot of strong characters. The way we maintain our leadership is by pushing innovation year after year. Not only *who* you're playing as, but what are you *doing*? If we just brought out some new Skylanders, that probably wouldn't be enough for this year. We really had to introduce new play packs. We did that with the villains, and I think that, year after year, that's what the Skylanders franchise needs to do. As long as we keep hitting it hard creatively, we can maintain our leadership. It's fun more than anything to be in competition.

## What's your vision for the future of Skylanders in terms of hardware and software innovation, online components, and so on?

I can't talk specifically about the near future, but in a general sense, what we want to do is make you believe that magic has appeared in our world and that you have some special ability to control it. Making a toy come to life in the Skylands is sort of the beginning of it. Having Lightcore's eyes glow as it gets close to the portal... those little things build a sense of magic and power for particularly the younger end of our audience. We want kids to feel strong, heroic, special, and enchanted. Anything that does that while connecting with a tangible, physical activity—that's where I see it. It's hard to predict the future now, 'cause it's moving insanely fast. In 15 years, who knows? Maybe you'll close your eyes and you'll be in Skylanders. ♦

## CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

1980

### FIRST ADVENTURES

After publishing their own pen-and-paper role-playing adventure, Reiche and artist friend Erol Otus get a job working for D&D creator Gary Gygax at TSR in Wisconsin.

1982

### THE CREATOR

The Tan-Kreen, an alien race created by Reiche, appears in the second set of Advanced Dungeons & Dragons Monster Cards.

1983

### ORIGINAL INDIE

After forming an independent video game studio, Reiche creates the well-regarded game Archon for Electronic Arts.

1988

### ROOTS OF SUCCESS

Reiche begins working with Robert Leyland, who would later invent the Skylanders portal technology at Toys for Bob.

1989

### NEW BEGINNINGS

After making several successful games, Reiche forms a new studio, Toys for Bob, with Fred Ford.

1994

### TO THE STARS

Toys for Bob strikes gold with its first game, Star Control, a classic space shooter/sim that spawned a successful sequel.

1994

### CULT CLASSIC

Toys for Bob creates The Horde, an odd action/strategy game that used full-motion video footage starring '80s teen heartthrob Kirk Cameron.

2000

### YOUNGER CROWD

The studio makes its first children's title, the licensed game 102 Dalmations: Puppies to the Rescue.

2001

### JOINING THE GIANT

After working with the company on a string of games, Activision purchases Toys for Bob.

2011

### LIGHTNING STRIKES

Skylanders Spyro's Adventure releases, which uses a portal base to connect chip-equipped toy figurines to transfer data into the game. It's becomes an unprecedented success at retail.



# KEYS TO VICTORY

We tested over a dozen mouse-and-keyboard combos. Here are the best of the best.

by Ben Reeves

## Roccat Ryos MK Pro

**Pros:** Extremely customizable, stores over 500 macros on 2MB of flash memory, four key-switch styles, built-in USB and audio pass-through connections **Cons:** Bulky design, blue is the only option for backlighting

**Bottom Line:** A great mechanical keyboard that uses Cherry MX key switches to produce lightning-fast input while remaining nearly silent. Each key can be programmed to illuminate individually, letting you highlight the keys you need. However, one of the most important features for gaming is the N-key rollover, which lets us hit multiple keys at the same time without any conflicting or missed commands. There is nothing missing from this keyboard, aside from maybe a splash of color.

SUPPLY

\$169.99 [roccat.org](http://roccat.org)



## Logitech G502 Proteus Core

**Pros:** Impressive tracking speed, 11 programmable buttons, five dpi settings, ultra comfortable, five swappable 3.6-gram weights **Cons:** Will ruin other mice for you **Bottom Line:** The G502 has customizable buttons, so you might think that you'd constantly hit something you don't want, but this mouse is so ergonomically designed that you're rarely in danger of issuing unwanted commands. The laser sensor ranges from 200 dpi all the way up to 12,000 dpi, and can be adjusted on the fly to help you ace your headshots. The mouse's high accuracy also means that

it remains pixel perfect — even in the age of 4K.

OUTSTANDING ★★★★★

\$79.99 [logitech.com](http://logitech.com)



BEST DEAL

## 1 SteelSeries Apex

**Pros:** Price, dozens of programmable macro keys, four custom lighting areas, dedicated media controls, two USB pass-throughs, extra-wide space bar **Cons:** Silicone dome switches lack the tactile feedback of other boards, extra diagonal arrow keys are distracting **Bottom Line:** A sleek machine with low-profile keys that offers quick response time. The Apex's anti-ghosting system focuses on 20 of the most used keys, such as 1-5, W, A, S, D, and F, in order to ensure that none of your commands get lost in the shuffle or lock up the keyboard. The raised dots on the W key kept our hand on target, and we never missed the space bar thanks to its extra-wide size.

VERY GOOD

\$99.99 | [steelseries.com](http://steelseries.com)



## 2 Logitech G910 Orion Spark

**Pros:** Sleek design, silent operation, concave keys hug the fingers, swappable hand rest, tablet and smart phone dock **Cons:** No pass-through ports, audio scroll wheel is in an awkward place **Bottom Line:** Logitech has made a big deal out of its new Romer-G switches, which are supposedly faster and more durable than other switches, and while this keyboard is plenty fast, it wasn't markedly different from the Ryos MK Pro. The extra-large keys feel great, and our fingers practically glided across the board. Logitech's companion Arx Control app also came in handy for displaying in-game info and system statistics.

VERY GOOD

\$179.99 | [logitech.com](http://logitech.com)



## 3 Mad Catz R.A.T. TE

**Pros:** Great dpi range of 100 to 8,200, surprisingly comfortable, handy thumb rest, low-lift-off height prevents unwanted gesturing **Cons:** Lightweight plastic doesn't feel sturdy, loose scroll wheel **Bottom Line:** This zany-looking ultra-light mouse glides easily across any surface. The unit's adjustable lift-off height means that it doesn't pick up extra movement when you adjust position. Mad Catz's drag-and-drop software interface also helps you customize a variety of macros for all nine programmable buttons, and while the 8,200 dpi is faster than most gamers will need, the R.A.T. can tick all the way down to 100 dpi, allowing for ultra-fine precision.

SUPERB

\$79.99 | [madcatz.com](http://madcatz.com)

## 4 Gigabyte M6900

**Pros:** Impressive sensitivity, price, great scroll wheel, comfortable feel **Cons:** Boring design, stiff dpi buttons **Bottom Line:** The M6900's big frame feels comfortable in large hands, but might dwarf those with smaller mitts. While this discount mouse doesn't have a lot of bells and whistles, it does have most of what you need to survive a firefight. It features 7 programmable buttons, a four-direction tilt wheel, and an adjustable dpi range of 800 to 3,200. The M6900 may look a little generic, but its stutter-free performance is hard to argue with.

AVERAGE

\$29.99 | [gigabyte.com](http://gigabyte.com)

BEST DEAL



## KARL BRUEGGEMANN – ANOTHER DAY IN DREAM LAND

This original album serves as a tribute to the work of Jun Ishikawa on beloved Kirby titles such as Kirby's Dream Land 3 and Kirby Super Star. A collection of spirited and unabashedly cute tracks, this album remains as adorable as Nintendo's pink vacuum ball.

\$3.99

[music.supermarcatobros.com](http://music.supermarcatobros.com)

## THE NEWSROOM: SEASON 2

Taking place over a five-day period leading up to Election Day 2012, this HBO drama from Aaron Sorkin (*The West Wing*, *The Social Network*) taps real headlines while exploring the behind-the-scenes buzz of an acerbic cable news crew.

\$59.99

[hbo.com/the-newsroom](http://hbo.com/the-newsroom)

## STAR WARS: THE CLONE WARS – LOST MISSIONS

After the Disney buyout, the CG Lucasfilm series that bridged the gap between Episodes II and III was cut short. Thankfully, after its Netflix debut, fans can catch the epic final season, which sets the stage for Darth Sidious' ultimate act of evil against the Jedi.

\$45.99

[starwars.com](http://starwars.com)

## THE WAKE BY SCOTT SNYDER & SEAN MURPHY

When the Department of Homeland Security comes knocking on Lee Archer's door, the marine biologist is whisked to the depths of the Arctic Circle to study a mysterious new creature. When things go horribly wrong, she finds herself struggling to keep her head above water in a drowned oil rig.

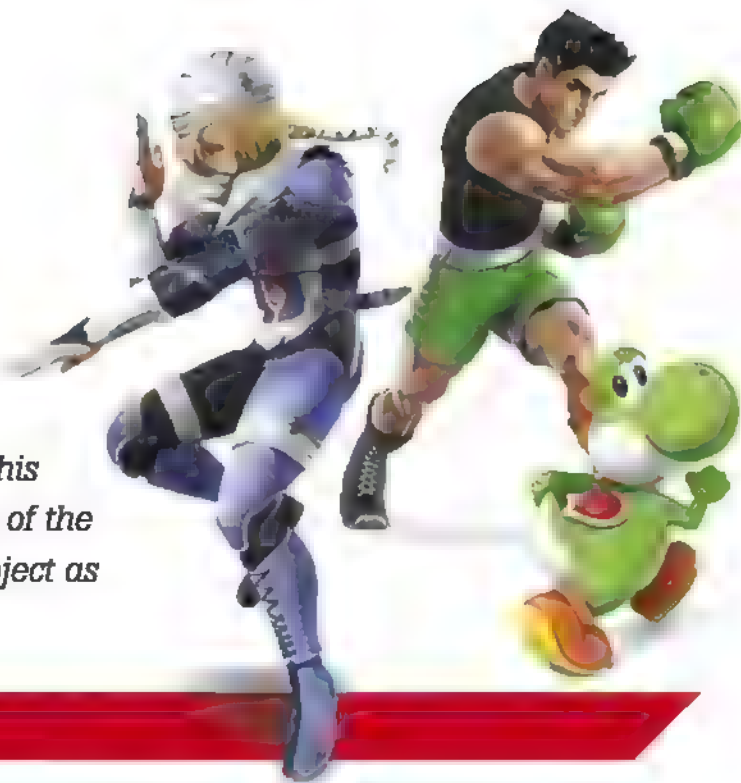
\$24.99

[vertigocomics.com](http://vertigocomics.com)



# Super Smash Bros. Diaries

The mastermind behind Super Smash Bros. returns with his third column for Game Informer. Now, with both versions of the game in the hands of gamers, Sakurai reflects on the project as a whole and some of the decisions that went into it.



by Masahiro Sakurai



## How are things now that development is over?

Actually, I think you could call it a pretty unique situation. Having the Wii U version go gold right after the Nintendo 3DS version, one would think the work would get easier, since the fighter balancing was already complete...but that's not exactly the case.

We released the "Smash Bros. for Wii U 50 Fact Extravaganza" video a bit ago, and the fact is, there's so much material in this game that we had no problem filling up that video – even without covering the fighters, stages, or items. We've been continually working on the Wii U game even through the 3DS project, of course, but in the end, development was especially difficult.

Our goal was to have it so anyone could pick up the game and have fun in a short period of time, but if you're the ones making the game, it's not so easy for you. It felt like, after we managed to stagger past one goal we had for ourselves, there was another goal further away we then had to sprint for.

We're running into the same experience with Mewtwo development, even after the Wii U version wrapped up. I'm finding it very rough going, to be frank, so I don't feel like development is over at all.

## How did the eight-player mode come about?

Eight player fighting was actually something first written into the design document for Super Smash Bros. Melee. We weren't able to overcome the issues involved then, though, technical and otherwise. This time, however, we were finally able to get it working on a limited basis.

Getting up to eight people in a match expands the possibilities for multiplayer, of course, but also makes Team Battles and things like Classic mode and event matches in single-player take on new dimensions. You may not have the opportunity to assemble eight people together at once too often, but I hope you'll give it a try.

## What was the thinking behind Smash Tour?

The more deeply people play Smash Bros., the more they start seeking higher levels of precision in the gameplay. At the end, this leads them to prefer the Final Destination Stage with no obstacles, no items, certain stock settings, etc. We did try to make this game so you can play it any way you like along these lines, but that approach does veer a little from the original intention of the design.

Smash Tour is the result of us pressing forward in our original direction – having a lot of changing elements in the field, leading to totally unpredictable situations. Our inspiration here wasn't to copy the board game format, and the rules don't follow those lines; the gameplay is designed with Smash Bros. in mind.

It's set up so all sorts of things can happen in a short time, making it impossible to guess who will win. It's a very Smash Bros. like approach, and while it can be unfair at times (like any board game), it's built for people who can laugh all of that off as they enjoy the experience. I'd

like you to gather your Smash Bros. pals together and try the mode out, maybe playing three games to start.

We engage in multiplayer during our lunch breaks, and these days we play Smash Tour mode every time. It's fun, in part because it's okay to an extent if the players involved vary widely in skill.

## What elements of the game stick out to you?

The game is packed with a wide variety of elements, far more than I could ever completely cover here. There's the Amiibo support, Stage Builder, My Music, the Mii fighters, the Photo Studio, Masterpieces, the Stadium mode, online play, support for a multitude of controller options....I could talk about each one, but there's not enough space to go in-depth about them all.

Still, looking back, I think to myself "I'm amazed we created all this." Just test playing all this stuff took a pretty hefty chunk of time.

## Will there be another Smash Bros.?

I can't positively declare there won't be. With both Melee and Brawl, I made those games with the thought that there

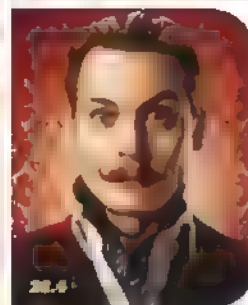
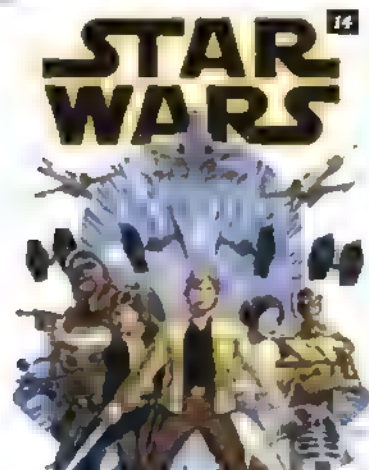
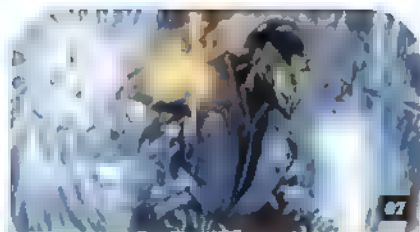
wouldn't be any more sequels. Thus, I really can't deny the chance for another. However, as for myself, I don't think there will be.

Our intention here was to provide extra merits to the game which go far beyond the sale price. In terms of scope, and in terms of sheer number of characters, we went beyond our limits long ago. And yet, if we cut the number of fighters or modes in a future game, I'm sure there would be complaints.

You could say that all the effort in the past to stretch out, keep pushing myself, and provide a little these extra merits wound up tightening the noose around my neck in the future. That may seem like it contradicts my personal desire to keep giving gamers as much as I can, but I don't see any easy answer for it. And yet, despite that, I also have trouble picturing someone else taking my place and providing all this value-added content without me.

I feel like we've arrived at a very difficult place. One thing I can say, however, is that I hope people don't think that Smash Bros. has come to its natural conclusion as a matter of course. That's my personal plea. ♦





## January

### 04 Downton Rolls On

The fifth season of *Downton Abbey* kicks off tonight. Although the show-runners claim this season has new loves and secrets, we believe the big twist for this season is a crossover with the only other two BBC shows people watch: *Sherlock* and *Doctor Who*. It's a known fact that the more British people you cram into a show, the more sophisticated it becomes. Adding the world's greatest detective and a time-traveling spaceman to the already-enormous cast is sure to turn viewers into refined and productive members of high society.

### 06 CES 2015

Over the next five days, Las Vegas Hilton & Casino is home to the latest and greatest in technology at this year's CES expo. We expect to see plenty of more affordable 4K televisions this year and several companies jumping onto the VR bandwagon. Game announcements occasionally trickle out of this show, so make sure to visit [gamerformer.com](http://gamerformer.com) for up-to-the-minute news.

### 07 Mortal Kombat: The Next Generation

In advance of 2015's *Mortal Kombat X* video game, DC Comics is releasing a new comic book series that introduces a number of the new combatants and shows how the story moves into the future. The first issue hits today and ships with two interlocking covers featuring Sub-Zero and Scorpion.

### 09 Liam Neeson Is Angry Again

In *Taken 3*, Liam Neeson is a badass who plays by his own rules. You may think you've seen this movie already, but that was probably *The Grey*, *Unknown*, *Non-Stop*, or *Taken 2*. The big difference in this movie is the "3" in the title. Liam is also older.

### 13 Pocket Gamer Connects London

The first of Pocket Gamer's three mobile-game conferences in 2015 kicks off today in London's Vinopolis. More than 100 speakers, including Ramona of Vlambeer and Peter Molyneux of 22Cans, will share insight into mobile game development. The expo runs for two days.

### 14 The Force Returns

You won't have to wait until *Star Wars: Episode VII* for new adventures starring Luke Skywalker, Han Solo, and Princess Leia. The new *Star Wars* comic series by Marvel is canonical and fills in the gaps between *A New Hope* and *Empire Strikes Back*. The first issue, hitting today, features the talents of Jason Aaron and John Cassaday.

### 16 Another "Original" TV Series

One of the newest trends in television is to turn an old popular movie into an ongoing series. *Fargo*, *From Dusk Till Dawn*, and *Hannibal* are recent examples. Syfy adds *12 Monkeys* to

the list today. It ditches what people didn't like about the film—like Bruce Willis and Brad Pitt—and focuses on the confusing time-travel narrative just like you always wanted.

### 20 New Releases

• *Saints Row IV: Re-Elected* (PS4, Xbox One)

### 22 Global Game Jam

Thousands of game developers spread across hundreds of locations join forces today to create video games for the annual Global Game Jam. The theme is revealed after the keynote address, and then all of the teams are tasked to create a game based on that theme over the span of three days. Last year, more than 3,000 games were

made using the theme "We don't see things as they are, we see them as we are."

### 23.2 MagFest 13

Over 40 musical acts will perform at this year's MagFest, a three-day video game music show held in National Harbor, Md. Performers include Powerglove, The Megas, Rare Candy, and Super Guitar Bros.

### 23.3 PAX South 2015

Held in San Antonio, PAX South offers a wide look at games coming down the pike in 2015. This year's show also boasts a tabletop indie showcase. Additional activities include panels and a PC-gaming area. The show runs through Sunday.

### 23.4 The Year Of The 'Stache

What if Johnny Depp had a mustache? That appears to be the premise of today's theatrical release, *Mortdecai*. In the trailer, Depp strokes his stache, and also uses a funny little comb on it. The movie also stars Gwyneth Paltrow, Ewan McGregor, Jeff Goldblum, and Aubrey Plaza, but their interactions with the mustache are currently unknown. If you prefer beards or sideburns, you should wait for the sequel.

### 27 New Releases

• *Dying Light* (PS4, Xbox One, PC)  
• *Dynasty Warriors 8: Empires* (PS4, Xbox One)  
• *Grand Theft Auto V* (PC)  
• *Hyperdimension Neptunia Re-Birth 2* (Vita) ♦

2015





# The SCIENCE FICTION Issue

NO MAN'S SKY  
» Pg 78

DESTINY  
» Pg 80

LOOKING INTO THE FUTURE  
OF SCIENCE FICTION  
» Pg 82

THE TOP 25  
SCIENCE FICTION GAMES  
» Pg 70

Great science-fiction hits always tantalized fans with the endless possibilities that lie beyond our world and time. Whether you're exploring the final frontier, a terrifying future, or an alternate history, video games are uniquely suited to make these memorable moments feel immersive and personal.

This month, we're celebrating the creative and engaging experiences that the sci-fi genre offers gamers. We start with our cover story, a blowout of what we feel is the most promising sci-fi game of 2015: No Man's Sky. Hello Games' ambitious indie title offers players an entire universe to explore, and we've got new screens and details to share. We also take an in-depth look at the future of Destiny and other exciting sci-fi titles on the horizon, including Evolve, Halo 5: Guardians, and a host of others. Finally, we celebrate the illustrious history of the genre in video games with our list of the top 25 science-fiction games of all time.





# Unraveling The MYSTERIES Of The UNIVERSE

*We spent two days at Hello Games' studio experiencing new content and interrogating the team for answers on the enigmatic No Man's Sky*

» PLATFORM  
PlayStation 4 • PC

» STYLE  
1-Player Action/Adventure

» PUBLISHER  
Hello Games

» DEVELOPER  
Hello Games

» RELEASE  
2015

When we decided to create a science-fiction issue, no heading game felt more appropriate than Hello Games' ambitious No Man's Sky. The creators are dedicated to the "sci" in sci-fi, creating their own periodic table, researching the physiology of animals and plants, studying planetary atmospheres and geology, and more. They're doing all the difficult technical work so that gamers will be able to sit back and explore an authentic-feeling universe filled with procedurally generated stars and planets populated by a nearly infinite amount of varied creatures and plant life.

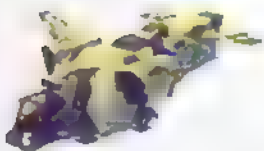
by Bryan Vore



# N

No Man's Sky debuted on Spike's VGX award show a year ago, and since that time it has generated mountains of buzz among the press and public. Fans pick through every new interview or article for the smallest details. People want to know what the game feels like and how it unfolds, but full knowledge of those elements won't be available until it releases in 2015 (no longer "coming soon-ish" or "when it's done"). However, on a recent visit to Hello Games' Guildford studio, we received information on elements that have long been held back, including the map of the entire galaxy, the first look at the enemies, a detailed talk on upgrades and the galactic economy, and plenty of answers to the random questions bouncing around in your mind that you won't get anywhere else.

Join us on a journey into the great beyond.



The mysterious alien temples teleport players to strange unknown worlds.



Murray: "We'll have the planet just kind of start with [polygons] and form and come up. It's not going to be like that. The start of Battlefield or anything like that. You're not going to get your nickname at the start, or have to cut your way out of a ship."

You begin at a random spot on one of the millions of planets on the edge of No Man's Sky's procedurally generated galaxy. You will almost certainly be the first player to see this planet, and, if no one else ventures over to check it out, you will be the only person to ever see it. Just because they are beginner planets doesn't mean they start players on an equal footing. "Some players will start on a planet that is incredibly harsh and have that start to their life in the game, and some players will start on the planet where resources are incredibly rare," Murray says. "I like that we won't be able to balance this game to within an inch of its life, and

that we won't be able to guarantee you will all have the exact same experience. I think that's cool and interesting and we should embrace that."

A minimap at the bottom of your screen guides you to a point of interest. If you don't get distracted along the way by the world around you, it takes a couple minutes to walk to this beacon. Your first ship waits for you there, beckoning you into space travel. You're free to stay on the planet as long as you like, but most players will hop in and blast out of the atmosphere. The groundbreaking game engine allows players to seamlessly leave a planet, cruise around space, and land on another world. But now

that you're off planet it might be a good time to check where you are in the wider scope of things.

The tap of a button brings up a map of the complete galaxy. The most zoomed-out view of the galaxy looks like a sphere that's been crushed down slightly by invisible hands on the top and bottom. Your location is shown as a tiny dot on the edge, and an imposing black hole rests in the center. Venturing here is the unstated goal of the game, offering more challenge and better rewards the closer you get. Hello Games is hesitant to push players into any kind of structured path, and would be perfectly content if you disregard the black hole and explore where you want.

## GALACTIC MAP

The first time you start up No Man's Sky, there is no story or narration. There's no tutorial. Instead, there's a wildly abstract sequence inspired by the ending of the movie 2001: A Space Odyssey. "The very first time, we just want the feeling like you warp in and see trippy visuals as the galaxy forms around you," says Hello Games' managing director and co-founder Sean

## A Different Kind Of Multiplayer

Hello Games receives all kinds of questions about the multiplayer, with people excited to play with their friends. Managing director Sean Murray wants to dispel a. that talk. "I think when people see [the galactic map] they are going to fully realize what it means to be that far away from somebody else who's playing. And I know that's a bit weird for people, but it's what's different about our game. And we want to embrace that. We don't want people just scouting off beside their friends. I actually want people to boot up the game and just think, 'Isn't the universe huge? Who are we? What are we all doing here?'"

Outside of seeing your friends' stats and their location on the galactic map, you will likely never meet up with them (though an in-game messaging system has been teased). The closest comparison is the multiplayer in Journey, except it will be far more rare. Other players won't have their online handle floating above them. They won't be able to voice chat. If they're in a ship, you might fly past them without ever knowing they are a real person.

In fact, the first time you see another player will be the first time you realize what your character looks like. "I think we will probably surprise people in terms of how they look," Murray says. "You effectively see the result, so you won't know what's inside. It's not an answer for people whether you are an alien or whether you are a human or what you look like."







The next zoom level on the map allows you to freely swoop through the stars. The enormity of the experience sets in here; talking about the concept of billions of stars is one thing, but seeing them all for the first time is breathtaking. Countless points of light fill the screen, hovering in blackness or brightly colored nebula. As the stars whoosh by, it's easy to understand how even millions of players working to visit as many worlds as possible

could barely make a dent in this enormous universe. Players can upload any new discoveries for everyone to see, but Hello Games is purposely not including a galaxy-completion percentage, because it would remain hopelessly small.

The hue of space clouds and rare colored stars hint at what resources and activities are contained within. If you scan an individual star, you are shown the name, how many planets

are in the solar system, and whether the sun has any special properties (like extra resources). If you're online, you learn additional things, like if any of its planets have already been discovered, or what class of space station is in the solar system. Zooming in on the galactic map further lets you examine the planets individually. If other players have already explored the planet, you get a detailed rundown of its points of interest. If this is an untouched frontier (or if you're playing offline), it's up to you to see what all of those markers mean. You can't simply warp anywhere, since the starter ship isn't equipped with a hyperdrive. You have to earn some currency to buy a new ship, not to mention the fuel required to reach whatever is in range of your current solar system.

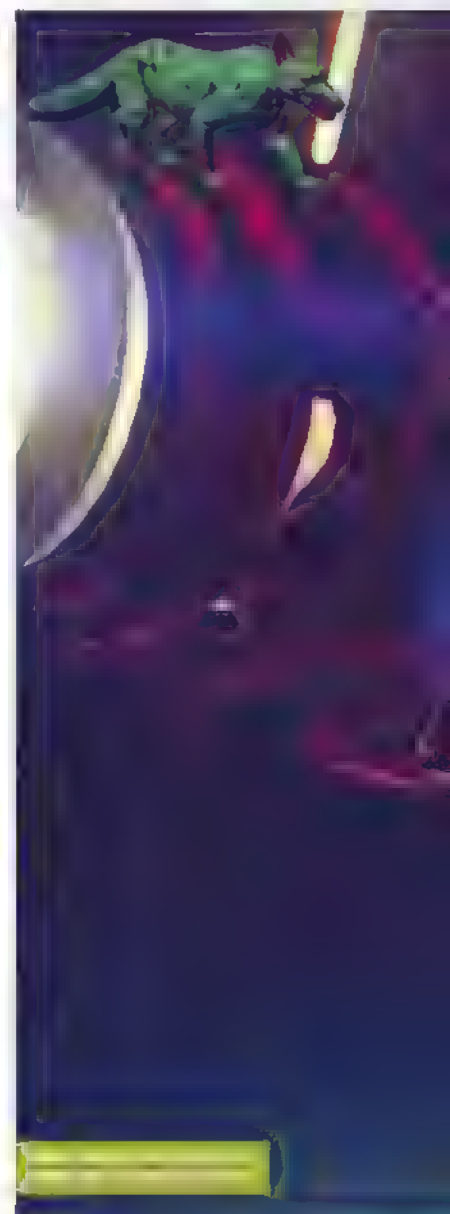
#### THE ECONOMY

To progress in any way, players need to earn money, called units. Fortunately, almost everything you do results in a deposit into your bank account. Blowing up ships, gathering resources and selling them, and discovering anything new (planets, points of interest, and creatures) are just a few examples. Players mine resources by using their gun and grenades to blast clusters of valuable cubes shown only in scanning mode. Hauling products to the next system to sell at a higher price can be lucrative, but pricey hyperdrive

fuel and cargo space share the same storage, so you have to do some calculating to determine if it's worth it.

Trading posts are dotted around planets, and offer a way to get business done without flying up to space stations all of the time. We visited one that buys up resources that you've harvested. It was busy, with all manner of ships coming and going. You can use this as a way to scout cool procedurally designed ships as well; you can't customize your ship, so you have to follow any that catch your eye back to the space station and buy it there.

If you're feeling bold, you can stake out the trading post and attack the ships as they arrive. This pays off for a while, but eventually the space station in that system is going to release the galactic police force on you. Even if you manage to survive and get away, the police remember you, and






are more likely to attack unprovoked. Various factions throughout the galaxy also keep tabs on your actions, and respond with warmth or aggression depending on how you treat them.

Other trading posts are specialized for specific upgrades to your space suit and weapons.

Not every store stocks the same inventory; in addition to specific items, shops also have ratings that determine the general quality of goods they can sell. If you're looking to enhance your shield or laser, you have to find that exact type of store and hope that it's rated high enough to sell the caliber of upgrade you need. Utilizing data from systems previously explored by other players helps with this task immensely. Otherwise, you have to visit unidentified point-of-interest markers across various planets to find what you're looking for.







A space station populates every solar system, and the general shape indicates the quality of items within. Multiple docking bays across the outer surface mean there's always an open parking spot. You hop out and can browse tradable cargo goods or stroll down the line of ships checking out their stats and prices. Generally, the available stock consists of whoever happens to be currently visiting. "You actually see ships coming in and out and you might see a ship that you really want to buy and then it will just take off and be gone," Murray says. "You'll have to wait and see if it comes back or go out after it."

When some of these space stations look like a spherical death star from Star Wars or a Star Trek Borg cube, you

may be curious as to what happens if you shoot it. "Pretty much everyone within a short space of time of playing the game will turn around and start attacking space stations, from what we've seen," Murray says. While you can't blow them up completely (a space station needs to remain in every solar system so players can buy a ship if they need one), you can damage them enough that their quality ranking drops. Hello doesn't reward you for damaging these structures, but you earn units and resources for destroying any police ships that emerge from it to attack you. "It's not something that we're encouraging, but we want this place to feel real," Murray says. "We want people to feel this is a real working universe."



## COMBAT

No Man's Sky's planets are populated with procedurally generated creatures and plant life to discover. The massively varied animals can all be scanned and uploaded to the common player database. You get worldwide credit and a unit payout for being the first to see that particular purple jungle cat with large shoulders and red eyes, for example. However, you get no additional units if you pull out your weapon and kill it. The team doesn't want to provide an incentive to wipe out every living thing that passes before your eyes, but won't stop you if that's what you're into. Animal lovers can live in harmony with nature, but they might have to sacrifice their principles to survive an unprovoked attack

from particularly aggressive creatures. So do you always have to feel guilty whenever you shoot something?

This is where the Malevolent Force comes in. This robotic enemy army isn't all that malevolent as far as motivations go. They are simply trying to maintain the balance of the universe. On some planets they patrol, keeping an eye out for anyone who kills creatures, carves out resources, or generally changes the environment. If you're just strolling around scanning things in, they leave you alone. If you draw their attention, they attack like traditional first-person shooter enemies, shooting lasers, strafing, and taking cover.

"These are the ancient machines to try to keep you in line," art director and co-founder Grant Duncan says. "These guys are like the low-level A.I. that have been left behind by whoever created them." We saw both the bipedal version seen below in concept art and a quadruped, dog-like robot. Cold and unfeeling, these machines

are programmed to eliminate anomalies quickly and get back to patrol. "They're not going to be procedural in the same way," Duncan explains. "They will be a constant in the universe. It's that small gameplay loop of combat in the same way that Halo has its group of five archetypes. You know how they behave and you know how to deal with them. You gradually learn. We discovered that we needed something like that in the game. We're still experimenting with this quite a bit."



## An Early Look At Upgrades

Your ship, weapon, and suit are the three key elements to upgrade in No Man's Sky. Most skills and stats are rated on a scale of one to five. Your suit and weapon dubbed the multi-tool, both experience permanent upgrades that don't vanish on death. Ships cannot be upgraded -- you simply buy a new one with the features you're looking for. This list is only a partial look at the total possible upgrades.

### Ship Stats

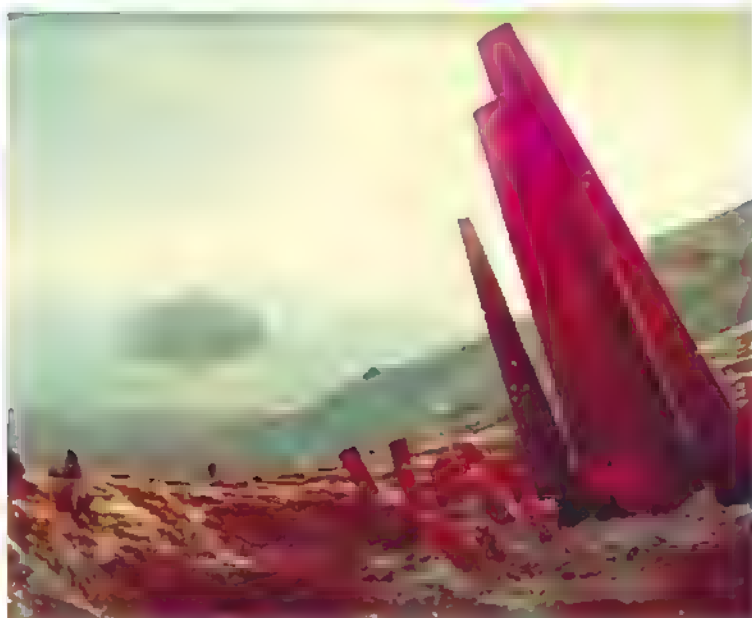
- » Shields
- » Laser Beam
- » Plasma Shot
- » Rapid-fire Shots
- » Energy Torpedo
- » Wing (affects maneuverability)
- » Hull (separate stats to allow landing in toxic, corrosive, and radioactive environments)
- » Engine (general speed)
- » Hyperdrive (hyperspace jump distance)
- » Cargo Space (split between cargo and hyperdrive fuel)
- » Cloaking

### Suit Stats

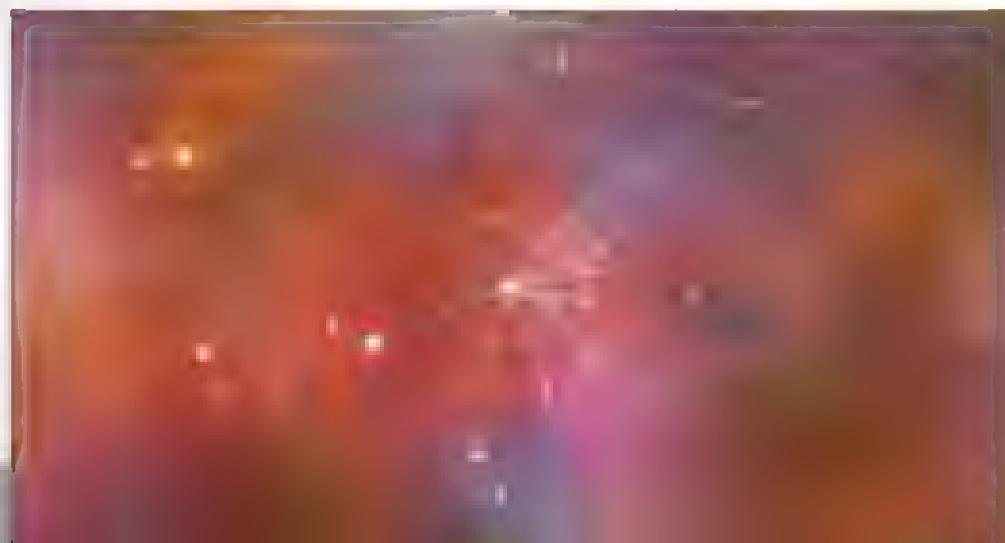
- » Shields
- » Resource Capacity
- » Jetpack (height and hangtime)
- » Air Hazard - (separate stats for toxic, corrosive, and radioactive environments)
- » Liquid Hazard - (length of time submerged in water, acid, and alcohol)

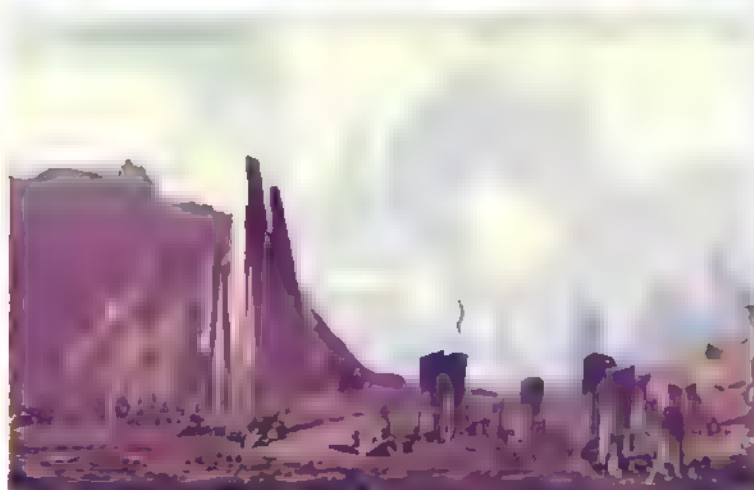
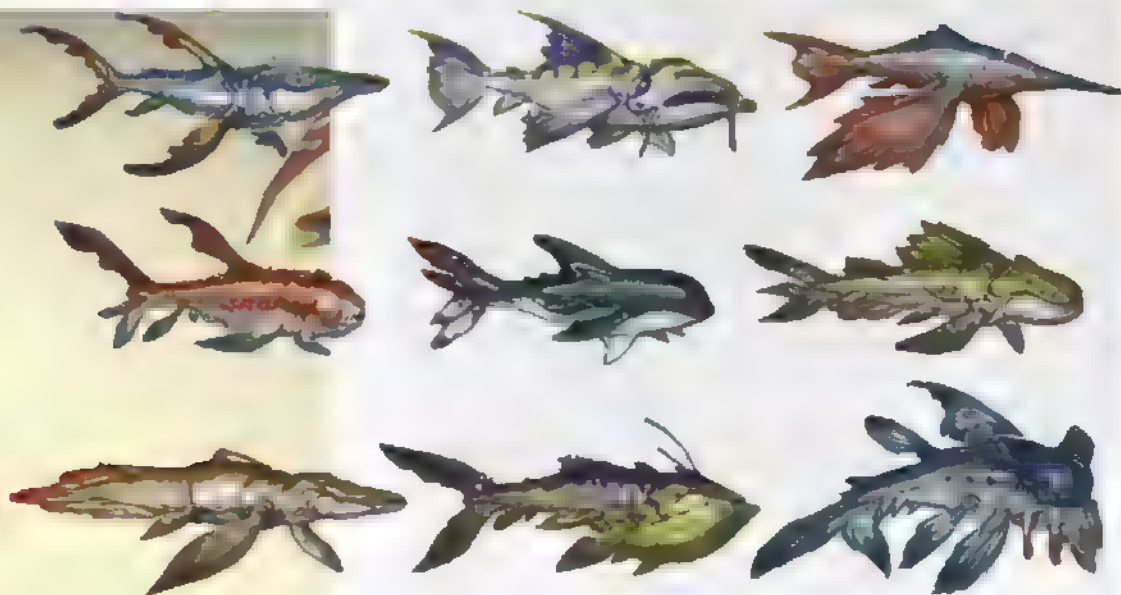
### Weapon Stats

- » Laser Beam
- » Plasma Grenade
- » Energy Shot
- » Scan Distance
- » Scan Type (certain things can't be scanned until this is upgraded)









#### SPACE BATTLES

Space combat is made with an arcadey, pick-up-and-play feeling in mind, and also takes some inspiration from the Bungie's legendary sci-fi shooter. "If you play Halo, the choices that you make are who to take on first, whether you just go, 'I'm going to get rid of all the grunts because even though they're little they are causing me a lot of trouble,'" Murray says. "You're choosing smaller ships to take out first potentially, if that's what you go for. Or you might take out the one bigger more powerful ship."

These smaller ships normally don't

have shields, so they're faster to destroy. If you drain the shields of a bigger ship, it flees like one of Halo's elites to let its shields recharge. Some ships can heal others like the drones in Halo 4, so you want to go after them first. Choosing the right weapon for the job is crucial as well. Lasers specialize in melting shields, while plasma projectiles do heavy damage to ship hulls. Torpedos pack a punch, but they're not quite as fast as the others. Another incentive for changing up weapons is to manage the cooldowns. Thankfully, you don't have to pop in to space stations to buy ammo, nor worry about running out in the middle of a firefight.

So what happens if you get taken out on one of these adventures? People have speculated about punishing roguelike style permadeath, but the reality isn't quite as harsh. If your ship is destroyed, you still can use a barebones lifepod to get to a nearby planet or space station. Your ship and whatever cargo it was carrying is lost. Your bank account remains intact, as do all

of your suit and weapon upgrades, though you have to build up the funds to buy a new ship before you can leave the solar system again. If you die on foot, you simply teleport back to wherever your ship is parked and lose anything you collected since you last checked in with it.

The risk of death and frustration increases the closer you get to the center of the galaxy.

"Losing your ship and having no money in the center of the galaxy is a tough story. But it is totally possible to bounce back from that. It's just going to take you some time," Murray says. "You are sitting there going, 'Right, my next few hours are just to get back on the ladder to where I was.' But that makes it meaningful. I know that's tough, but when you've been surviving in DayZ for a week and then you get killed, it hurts. But it leads to a really cool story. As long as it feels like it was your fault, that there are things that you could've done, then I think that it's fair."



## JOURNEY TO THE CENTER

If you decide that the journey to the center of the galaxy is for you, you can expect it to last quite a while, even if you're trying to move quickly. The current estimate is 40 to 100 hours, with the lower end accounting for players who min-max and only go toward the center in the most efficient way possible. Hello Games has full control over the size and spacing of the galaxy, and can tweak it to shorten or lengthen that journey. Any of that tinkering will be long over by the time the game actually comes out. "We're not going to sit there saying, 'People are getting to the center too early. Stop them!'" Murray says.

Along the journey, players can get a taste of planets up ahead if they come upon rare alien temples. The one we saw had a central spire surrounded by a ring of portals to different places with two giant flying snakes circling above. Each portal requires a different weapon or combination of weapons to open, almost like a door in Metroid. These

teleport you to a random planet closer to the center of the galaxy. You have no idea what mysteries, riches, or dangers await on the other side. You also don't have your ship with you, so there's no way to leave the atmosphere. The idea is that you explore and fill your pockets as much as you dare before running back to the safety of the porta.

As to what's in the center of the galaxy, Hello plans to keep it a secret and let players discover it themselves. "In my ideal world, they will make the journey and see what's there and they will realize the game doesn't end at that point," Murray says. "In some ways it's like a beginning. I'm hoping that it's a nice moment for them that they actually feel like not sharing.. Just to be clear, it's not going to run a video of me saying, 'Hi, welcome to the center of the galaxy.'" ♦

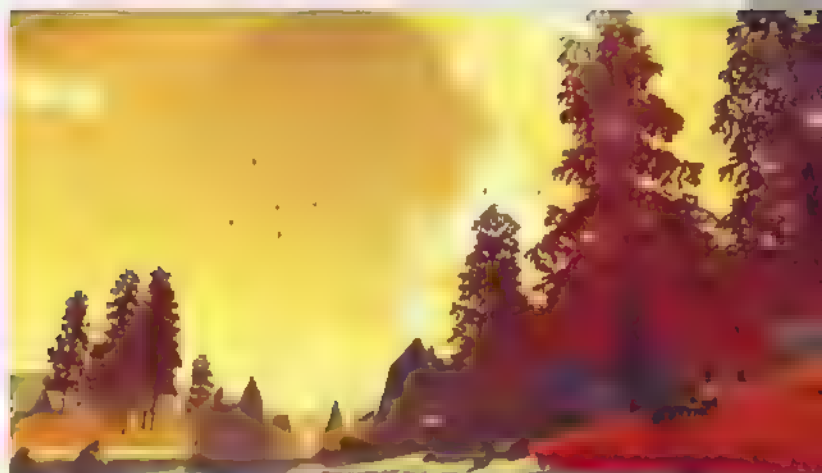
*Experience a whole month of No Man's Sky updates including video interviews, a look at the secret backroom development, and more at [gameinformer.com/nomanssky](http://gameinformer.com/nomanssky)*



## Early Access And Beta Possibilities

When you consider that the procedurally generated universe that Hello Games created already exists, it's easy to wonder what the team is working on for the rest of development. What kinds of tasks are still on the list? "We're making the universe more interesting. We're making the mechanics more interesting. Deeper things like that," managing director Sean Murray says. "I know it sounds ridiculous, but I want it to be finished before it comes out." This means there will be no early access or open beta testing, but Hello wants as much private playtesting as possible so they can extrapolate and try to predict the progression of the final audience. "Maybe this is hubris, but we put out millions of people making journeys starting from different points. Then guess what their upgrade ramp will be, see how long it takes, and how many jumps. [Estimating it will] probably take 20 percent longer than that and kind of averaging it out."









# A GLIMPSE

## *Of What's To Come*

*We explore The Dark Below,  
and ask Bungie our biggest  
Destiny questions*

► PLATFORM

PlayStation 4  
Xbox One  
PlayStation 3  
Xbox 360

► TYPE

Online  
Multiplayer Shooter

► PUBLISHER

Activision

► DEVELOPER

Bungie

► RELEASE

December 9

I've taken my guardian into the future. It's mid-November, and Destiny's first expansion, The Dark Below, is still nearly a month away from release. But at Bungie HQ, they're already putting the finishing touches on this first major new piece of content since the game's release. Thanks to the magic of testing servers, the team is able to pull my guardian into the freshly minted content for a full tour. Story missions, strikes, competitive maps, and even the raid are all fair game, and I set out to find out what's new. Along the way, the leaders of the Destiny team share their insight into the game's launch, respond to criticism and praise, and hint at what is on the way next year.

by Matt Miller





The most surprising thing about visiting Bungie post-release of *Destiny* isn't anything about the game itself, but the studio's culture of active play. Like millions of players around the world, the developers at Bungie are diving into *Destiny* on a nightly basis, sharing in the highs and lows of the leveling process, seeking out ways to collect the best loot, and figuring out the optimal strategies (or exploits) to bring down raid bosses.

More unusual is the fact that they're not cheating along the way. From the heads of the company to the designers crafting levels and maps, the team at Bungie seems to have adopted a policy that the live servers are sacrosanct from artificial manipulation, and that players use their own guardians when testing new content. "We are super strict about that," says lead designer M.E. Chung. "One of the things that was so important to us for development of *The Dark Below* was in order for us to get real feedback about

how painful or joyful things were going to feel, we needed people to bring in their attached character that they had at home. It's amazing what that does to your perception of the play experience when you have something that you spent a lot of time on." As I talk to the team, it's clear they share the same triumphs and frustrations of the broader player base. Unhappy about the lengthy process and materials needed to upgrade your exotic items? Annoyed by the drop rates of needed items from the raid loot tables? You

can bet that more than one person at Bungie feels the same way, and is actively campaigning to make a change.

The first of those changes is on display in *The Dark Below*. I'm at level 29 as I head to the tower for the first time, and I'm greeted by a new cinematic that lays out the setup for the expansion — the coming of the Hive god named Crota. Crota was mentioned in passing during a memorable mission in the base game, but — like many aspects of the initial

release's narrative — there wasn't much to follow through. In the new cinematic, we learn of the Hive's attempts to revive Crota and set him loose on Earth. A new narrator is introduced in the form of Eris Morn. She's a guardian who set out with five fellow guardians to confront the evil on the moon, but she was horribly maimed by the failed attempt. After a lengthy absence of self-imposed exile, she managed to make it back to Earth.

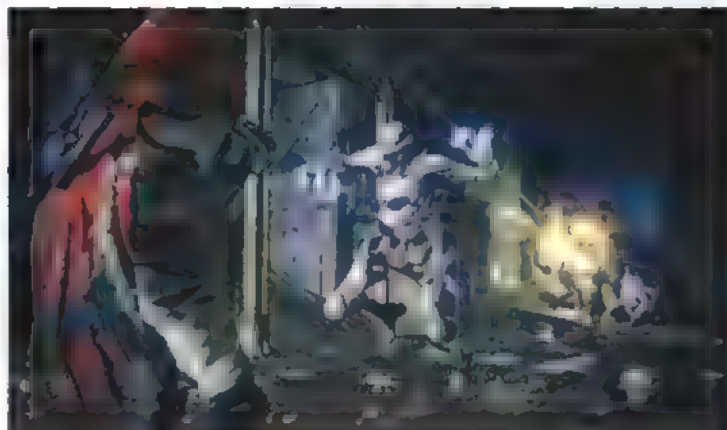
Eris Morn is the first thing I notice upon arriving at the Tower. Her cobbed-together ship floats behind her, and is much like she is — a strange amalgam of human and Hive technology. Her rambling and occasional wild gestures make it clear that she's at least halfway mad from her failed raid attempt, but she's also the only one who can offer guidance about how to stop the impending invasion and Crota's return. She wears a hunter's mask beneath her blindfold, and dark black tears endlessly pour down her cheeks.

Eris Morn represents a test case for



Bungie – a new approach to storytelling and mission integration after the disconnected and sometimes confusing narrative in the base game. The key to this new interaction is quest lines. Inspired by the exotic-weapon bounties that show up to random high-level players, quest lines are a more accessible path into content, with concrete narrative and mission steps, and often a designated reward upon completion. "It's reflecting a thing that we want to push on in the future, which is just making more adventure in our universe, and giving people a different window to see things from," says technical art director Ryan Ellis. "In this case there's a quest giver, she has a point of view and a story to tell you, and she's going to give you cool stuff for doing it."

The first quest line takes my fireteam into the three new story missions, with the overall goal the destruction of Crota's soul before it can be returned to his body. The first step on our quest sends us down to Earth's Cosmodrome, and into a new subterranean cave structure to fight a



Hive Knight named Sardon, the Fist of Crota. Along the way, elite lieutenant Knights charge our team with their swords flashing. After defeating one of them, I pick up the sword and slash through the hordes of Thralls that charge me. Upon reaching the boss, I'm hit by a new condition on my guardian – "A Dark Burden" eliminates my vertical movement mode, keeping me firmly rooted to the ground as the enemy boss bears down on me, adding an additional wrinkle to an already challenging fight.

Defeating the Fist of Crota opens up the next step in the quest line, but along the way I'm also making progress on the new bounties available

from Eris Morn. Like previous vendors, Eris' missions and bounties slowly increase your reputation, unlocking new shaders, emblems, and gear. Most of these new bounties tie back to Eris' motivation for revenge against the Hive, and also include some fun new options, like class-specific bounties targeted to particular Guardian kills, such as dropping foes with the warlock's axion bolt grenade.

The second story mission once again returns us to Earth, where the Hive are working to uncover the secrets of Rasputin, the A.I. warmind introduced in the original game. Rasputin's vault opens up beneath the surface of Earth, and my fireteam infiltrates the under-

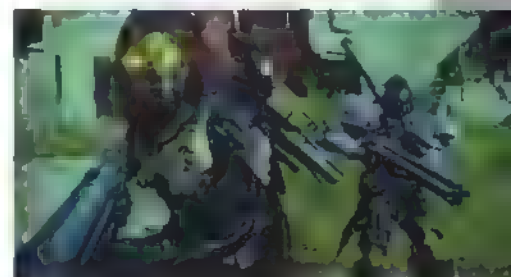
## ON NARRATIVE CRITICISMS AND STORYTELLING

Moving forward, there's a lot of emphasis on how we tell story. The way our missions work, as much as they look like some of the games we've made in the past, they're fundamentally different. So how do we have that kind of storytelling in the game? What are the multiple channels through which we tell stories? There are things like classic narrative campaign missions that we had in *Destiny*, and we're thinking about the ways we can continue to improve our craft there. And then there are some entirely new channels, like the Eris Morn quest-line stories, that we can build.

It is a huge area of focus for us, not just because our community wants there to be more and better story, but because we want it too.

We have really great ideas about all of these different combatants that we're up against, what their motivations are, what their history is, and what their take is on our solar system. That's the story that we're really looking forward to starting to tell. What is the Darkness? Who are these combatants? We've given you hints of that, and in the coming months and years, we can unpack that story, as well as the story of mankind's second chance in our solar system.

– Pete Parsons,  
chief operating officer



ground complex to contain a flood of Hive enemies. The mission introduces the boss named Omnigul, a Hive witch that delights in summoning additional enemies for us to fight. Interestingly, in a show of the newly integrated approach to narrative, her appearance in this Siege of the Warmind mission is just a tease – I won't fight her for real until I take on one of the new strikes a little later on. Instead, the final fight of this story mission involves a particularly challenging arena battle that includes seemingly endless respawning foes, as well as a raid-like mechanic of pulsating circles of damaging energy on the ground, which must be dodged as we bring down the Hive.





## ON RAIDS, RAID-LIKE CONTENT, AND MATCHMAKING:

We're certainly noticing that there is voracity in the fanbase for content that makes them think—content that challenges them in some different ways. I think that rather than say, "Yeah, we're going to make matchmaking for raids," the way I'm thinking about this problem is how we're going to create that kind of content and create those kinds of emotions in matchmade activities. I think that's the challenge. It's not how do we change the raid-design philosophy to allow for matchmaking. We're happy to see sites like destinylfg.net and other matchmaking sites basically help form groups, and we hope that some great relationships have been formed from those activities. I think looking at the LFG-style mechanics (looking for group) is something we absolutely want to do. We would love to get to a place someday where you can advertise your intent to people. Where you can say, "I want to do this. Are you looking to do this with me?" But we have absolutely no plans to do raid matchmaking at this time.

— Luke Smith, lead designer

A third mission takes us to Earth's moon, and an underground confrontation against Crota's soul—a crystallized hub of dark energy that spits out devastating blasts while Hive minions swarm our position. The completion of the fight puts a lid on the brief but entertaining new story path. Like many of the quest lines, it offers a reward: the new legendary fusion rifle called Murmur that can toggle between solar and arc-fire modes. While these few story missions don't take long to conquer, the concluded quest line opens up two more—one that offers a narrative lead-in to The Will of Crota strike, and a second that provides set-up for the raid, Crota's End.

Unlike the story missions, these subsequent quest lines aren't full-fledged missions, but they have more narrative than a simple bounty or patrol. One demanded that I head to a zone on Earth and kill enough Hive to draw out

a particular servant of Crota. Another requested that I fill a strange urn with the energies of destroyed cursed thralls, requiring me to me-e-e kill the exploding Hive grunts to progress.

"One of the things that we always talked about internally, but never really hit the nail on the head on, was we wanted every piece of gear to tell a story, and every piece of a gun to tell a story about where you've been, who you fought, and where you got it from," Chung says. "We're looking at how we can transform some of the questing to learn about whether it feels more compelling to people." As someone who has enjoyed the added context and lore of the exotic-weapon bounties, I like these new quest lines and the added objectives they provide, and

hope the practice extends beyond Eris Morn to other vendors and characters in the Tower in the future.

After blasting through the story missions, I take some time to explore new gear and leveling in the Tower. Vanguard and Crucible vendors carry new legendary items whose top-tier upgrades outstrip even my Vault of Glass raid gear in quality, so I buy some leg armor with Vanguard marks to help in my push to light level 32. I discover that new radiant shards and energy are available from the raid, and the two can be exchanged with one another through Eris to level the expansion raid gear. Other legendary items continue to use ascendant materials for upgrades—helping to solve the dilemma some players encountered

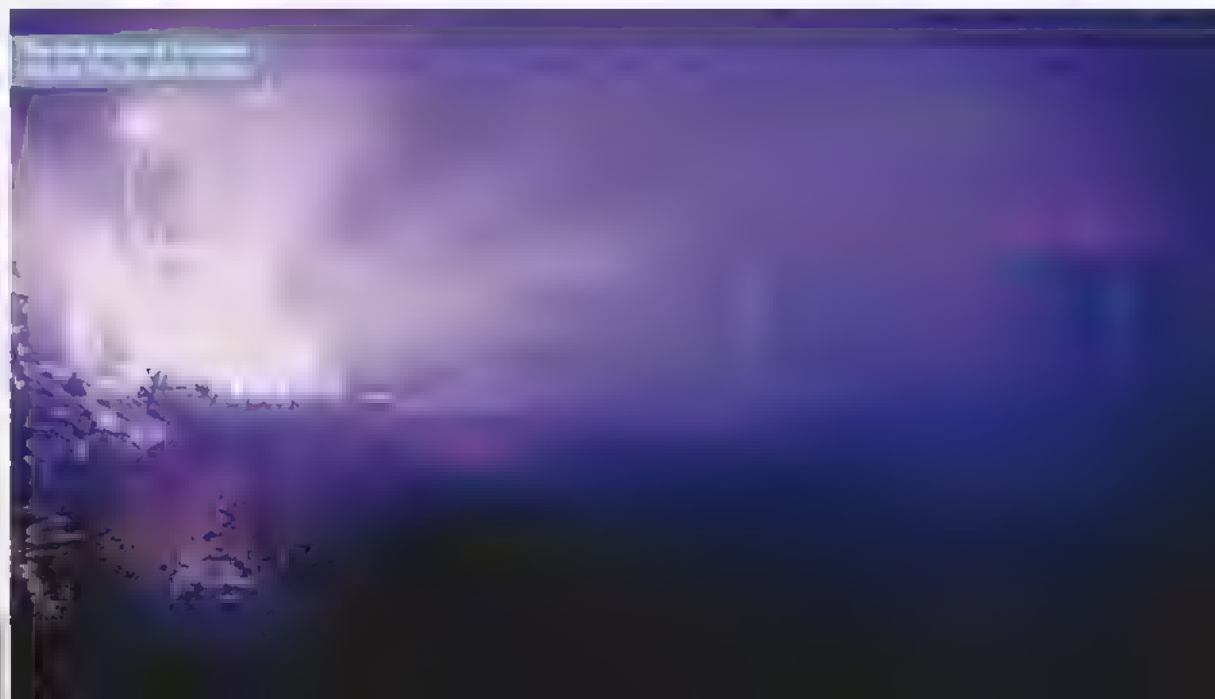
about waiting to upgrade until acquiring those final raid items.

Meanwhile, exotic items have seen a dramatic refit for the expansion. The mysterious weekend vendor named Xur now offers an option to buy a new item called an exotic shard, which can also be obtained by dismantling exotics. You can then turn an exotic shard into Xur, along with an existing exotic item and some glimmer, and he'll transform your exotic into a new

## ON DIFFERING GOALS IN PVP, AND HOW IT AFFECTS TEAM COHESION:

If there is an exotic bounty, or even a normal bounty that's telling you to do a specific thing, as soon as we see people going into these competitive experiences with alternate goals, it can really quickly deteriorate some of the other aspects of the game. It can get in the way of the competitive viability. It's something we're looking at. We don't always know what those things are going to do before we put them out there.

— Lars Bolden, lead designer



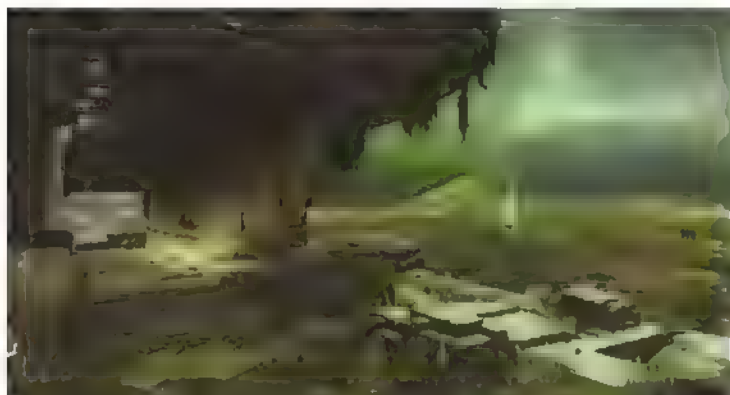


powered version more appropriate for the level 32 challenges on deck. The bad news is that your existing upgrades on that item are wiped away. However, in the name of encouraging players to experiment and get excited about exotic weapon acquisition, these items are now much easier to level than before. In particular, exotic items no longer require ascendant material to improve. I waste little time in turning in my beloved Ice Breaker sniper rifle so that I can get started on its new progression.

My next adventure in The Dark Below involves putting an end to Crota's servant, Omnigul, in a new cooperative strike called The Will of Crota, which is available to all players, regardless of console. The boss fight here is particularly memorable. Omnigul shows up halfway through the strike and begins spawning more foes as you fight her. Unlike the previous strike bosses,

Omnigul has recharging shields, and you fight her on the run as she flings one wave of minions after another at you. Her final retreat is a cramped chamber deep in the ground, and she screams angrily at us until we break past her spawns and focus our firepower on bringing her down.

The second new strike, The Undying Mind, extends Bungie's string of Sony exclusives, and is only available for PlayStation players. The mission sends players back to the familiar locale of the Black Garden, on a quest to halt the Vex from reanimating the garden's heart that was destroyed in the base game. The boss fight plays like a more advanced variation on the Nexus strike, pitting guardians against a massive floating robotic foe, but this time with a more robust shielding system and level geometry that makes it harder to find a safe place to hide from minions as they spawn.

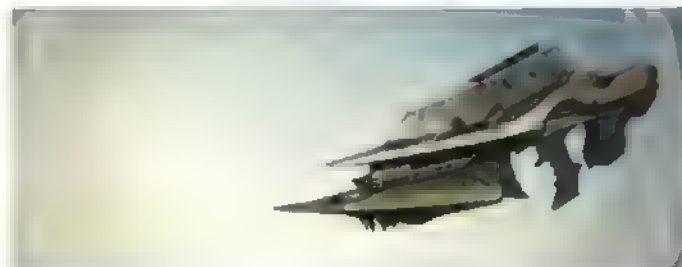


#### ON CHARACTER CONTINUITY IN SEQUELS

I can't make any commitments because, you know, who knows where we're going to be in even a year? But it's really important to us that you have a sense of continuity and a sense of character. Maybe we'll take an approach that looks like Mass Effect or World of Warcraft. There isn't a lot of excitement about a world that looks like Diablo, for example, where it's the same world with fundamentally different characters. Nobody's come up to me and said, "I'm really excited about losing my character." But we'll see where we're at because there may be changes in the future. Maybe we'll look at what platforms we're supporting or expanding into a new SKU that has different capabilities that could change the way we think. I'm not going to commit to doing anything like that, but character continuity is really important to us.

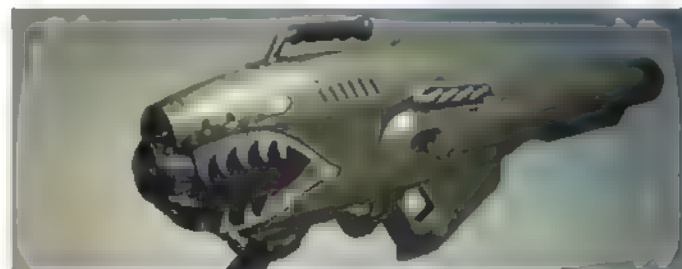
- Tyson Green, lead designer

The Dark Below expansion introduces a bevy of new legendary and exotic weapons and armor pieces. Each one brings some new surprises to the table. Here are some standouts



#### Marmur

This legendary fusion rifle will be a common sight on the battlefield, as it's the reward for the story mission quest line. It has the unique ability to switch between solar and arc damage with one quick adjustment in the upgrade window. The solar setting provides better range and zoom, but the arc option has a faster charge.



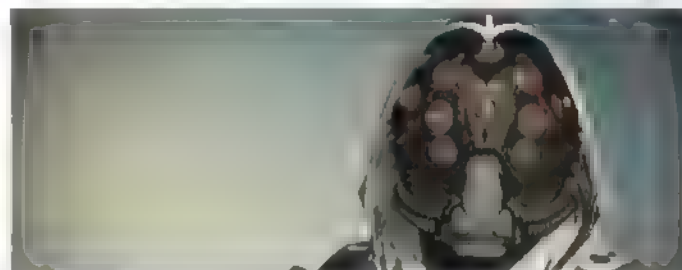
#### Dragon's Breath

The custom dragon paint job isn't the only hot thing about this devastating rocket launcher. In addition to its initial explosive blast, Dragon's Breath leaves a solar flare behind, making it a potent weapon for Control matches and ideal for raid and strike bosses.



#### Starfire Protocol

Are you a warlock looking for an alternative to the sunbreaker gauntlets, but you still like that extra grenade boost? This exotic chest piece provides an additional fusion grenade charge.



#### AT88 Arachnid

This spider-themed exotic hunter helmet is an ideal choice for gunsnipers; its upgraded abilities offer increased zoom while using your Golden Gun super.



After my cooperative adventures, I head off with Destiny's PvP team for some intense competitive dueling on the three new maps. "We have three archetypes of maps," say lead designer Lars Bakken. "We've got 3v3, which are primarily for Skirmish, Salvage, and Rumble. We've got 6v6, which are primarily for Control and Clash. But then we've also got our 6v6 vehicle maps, so there are essentially three different types of maps. For Dark Below, we wanted to hit one in each of those places."

The Caudron is an abandoned Hive Cathedral deep beneath the moon, and offers a close-quarters fragfest ideal for 3v3 matches like Skirmish. The alien landscape is filled with dangerous choke points at various

automated doors, all converging at an altar room near the map's center.

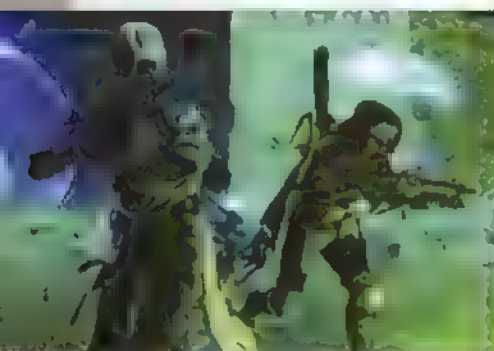
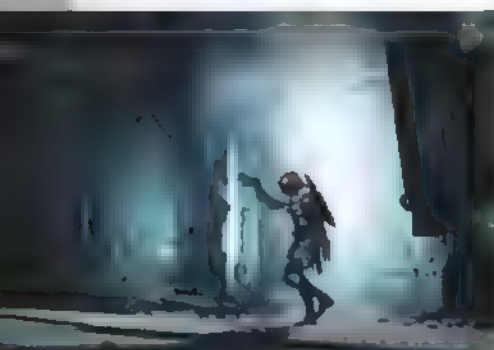
Meanwhile, Pantheon is Destiny's first wholly symmetric map. Set in the Black Garden, two teams choose between the map's three primary routes. Ideal for the popular Control game mode, A, B, and C points are all laterally aligned, and the central B point becomes a hotly contested zone. But ignore your home base, and it's easy for your team to get surrounded

in the center and torn to pieces.

The Skyschock competitive map offers a new option for larger scale conflicts, and includes multiple pike vehicles as well as a single interceptor that occasionally spawns. Skyschock is set in the Cosmodrome, and the scattered Hive ships show evidence of a great battle here before the locale was abandoned. Unlike previous vehicle-focused maps, Skyschock largely segregates infantry and vehicle

combatants. One side of the map is open with lots of routes to zip a vehicle through, while most of the control points and infantry lanes are hard to access without dismounting.

I like all three of the new maps, and I'm happy to see that there's something for all types of competitive players. Playing against the designers who built these environments helped to show off the strategic potential in each, from interesting sniping lanes on



#### ON RAID LOOT DROPS

I know personally how it feels to go one week where all three of my guys get shards and just feel bad about that. We are all that player who can be frustrated by that, so when we're talking internally about stuff that drives us crazy, a lot of it is the same stuff that drives the fans crazy. A bunch of us are playing the game silently right beside them. We're living in the complaints. I wish this was better. In Dark Below we're going to take some steps to do that with the armor and the rewards. I'm optimistic that it's going to be closer. I'm not optimistic that we're just going to get it right. We're continuing to learn.

— Luke Smith, lead designer

We're using some of the game's systems more intelligently in the raid. Those are going to smooth out the dry spells and "Really?" moments. Watching the first month of Vault of Glass completions, we thought: "Of course, we have to improve that." I think it's going to be quite a bit better. Part of me hopes that we didn't overcorrect. I don't want people saying, "I ran it three times and got everything I wanted. Goodbye. I no longer want to do this activity because I already got everything I want from it." Raiding in Destiny is some of what makes Destiny the social game we always wanted it to be. I hope that we haven't made anything in the Dark Below that hurts that. I hope that what we've changed will give people a less-frustrating experience.

— Tyson Green, lead designer

Pantheon to the many alternate paths to navigate through The Cauldron.

With a few hours of humbling competitive beatdowns under my belt, all that's left is the raid. Like the Vault of Glass, Crota's End is a devilish and challenging puzzle to solve, and my hosts offered few hints for success as we charged into the darkness. Like the previous raid, Bungie wants the community to uncover its secrets when the raid launches, and I agreed to keep

Crota's secrets off the record in the name of maintaining that alluring sense of discovery. I can say that what I saw of the raid offers the same complexity and potent difficulty that was established with Destiny's first raid, and I'm anxious to return and try my luck with my home team by my side. "We want each raid to have a central theme that drives everything," says lead designer Luke Smith. "The theme for Crota's End is a one way trip. If you start to think about that experience, we want a bunch of the mechanics of the activity to reinforce the one-way trip thing."

When quizzed on the features and missions on the way in this first episodic expansion, the developers at Bungie are the first to acknowledge that it's only a first step. As you read this, The Dark Below is either a few days from release or just recently been made publicly available. If my time at

Bungie told me anything, it's that the developers are listening to what we have to say as the expansion rolls out. Bungie is as eager as the rest of Destiny's players to hammer out the kinks and improve on an experience that has at turns been wildly successful at drawing in players, and simultaneously marked by some notable challenges out of the initial launch. After playing through The Dark Below's core missions and maps, I departed Bungie excited about the first steps towards improving a game I already love, warts and all. It's clear that Bungie sees Destiny as a long-term investment that is evolving with each passing week. For my part, having had a taste of what's ahead, I'm eager to take on Crota's forces for real. ♦

For more on The Dark Below head on over to [gameinformer.com](http://gameinformer.com)



## ON LEVELING, UPGRADES, AND PACING:

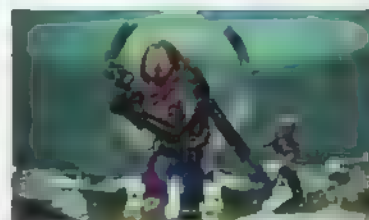
Things that haven't worked well are the pacing and transitions. There are a couple of inflection points where it was rockier than intended. You level very quickly on XP, and then you switch over to light. That was a sharper point than we expected, a little bit steeper and faster than we necessarily wanted it to be at first. A lot of people were surprised by how quickly they leveled up in Destiny. It was a conscious decision we made. But then they switch over to light progression. They started getting their gear from strikes and from the Cryptarch. They tapped out their blue gear pretty quickly, too. Early on, we heard from vocal players who were like, "Why am I here already?" And we're like, "Dude, you've been playing for 60 hours and it's only been out for three days. Get some sleep!" [Laughs] And then there's the transition point where people go from blue gear to legendary gear. That was very sharp in a way we didn't really want it to be. If our beta testing had run from levels 18 through 30, I think the game would've looked quite a bit different.

- Tyson Green, lead designer

## ON NON-SKIPPABLE CUTSCENES:

In a connected world where the computing is distributed it's actually an interesting challenge — how do you actually skip it? Is it a vote system where everybody in the party votes, or is it the fireteam leader? And how is that networked? How do you spawn everybody afterward, and how does the world reinstate itself? And it's just not simple, unfortunately. That's not an excuse — that's just a reality that this is actually kind of complicated. We are definitely looking at it and it definitely sits in the priority bucket, against a bunch of other really important stuff. We're not taking a philosophical stand against it, we're just working on all the things that we want to work on.

- Ryan Ellis, technical art director







*Looking Into The Future Of*

# SCIENCE FICTION

Since the dawn of video games, science fiction has been integral to the medium. Our first video game adventures involved fighting aliens and asteroids in space, and there's been very little slowdown in the years that followed. From the battle to control the last star in *Battleborn* to a time-hopping adventure in *Quantum Break*, the future of science fiction is bright and varied. We rounded up the genre's most interesting titles, and detail why you should put them on your radar.

by GI Staff





# Evolve

PLATFORM *Xbox One • PlayStation 4 • PC* PUBLISHER *2K Games*  
DEVELOPER *Turtle Rock Studios* RELEASE *February 10*

The gaming community let out a collective groan last summer when Turtle Rock announced it was delaying its monster-infused, asymmetrical multiplayer game until February. However, the cloudy skies above planet Shear contain a few silver linings that should hopefully make the wait more bearable. Hot off the heels of a well-received public alpha event, Turtle Rock gave us a full rundown of *Evolve*'s final tier of hunters, along with detailed explanations of all of the game's previously unannounced modes. Here's what you can expect when things kick off early next year.

## GAMEPLAY MODES REVEALED

After a year of secrecy, Turtle Rock

has finally revealed all the modes *Evolve* offers players. Shying away from typical multiplayer conventions, each mode provides a unique twist on the game's four-versus-one format. All these modes can be played with any combination of players, whether it's solo or a full group of five.

### Hunt Mode

The only mode we've seen up until now, Hunt mode serves as the foundation of *Evolve*'s four-versus-one gameplay. The rules are simple: The hunters must track down and slay the player monster to win. The monster triumphs if it can kill off all four hunters before reinforcements arrive, or evolve to stage three and complete an alternative, map-specific objective.

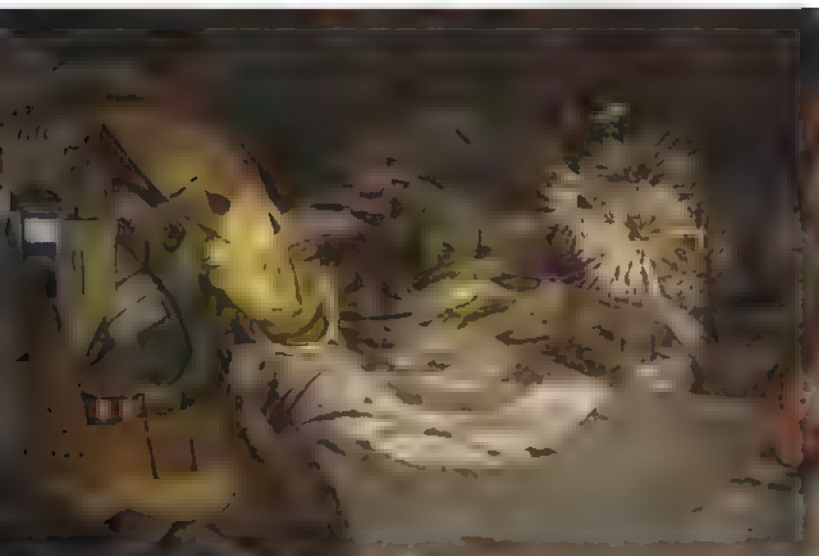
### Nest Mode

Eschewing the prolonged tracking phase of Hunt mode, Nest mode focuses the attention of the competing teams on specific points on the map: five procedurally placed monster eggs. As the hunters, it's your job to find the eggs and destroy them (you can also win by killing off the player monster). As the monster, you must defend the helpless eggs and eradicate the hunter squad. In an interesting twist, the monster can sacrifice an egg by hatching it, which spawns a stage-one, AI-controlled Goliath to fight by its side.

### Rescue Mode

The final main mode puts the hunters on defense. Three groups of civilians

are procedurally placed throughout the map. The hunters are tasked to find and revive these survivors and then escort them to a nearby evacuation point. Conversely, the monster must kill off as many civilians as possible – the winner is decided by whether the majority of civilians live or die. Civilians will actively call out and shoot off flares to attract the searching hunters, while a monster lurking nearby will cause them to fall silent. Turtle Rock says that each subsequent group contains more civilians than the last, so neither team is completely out of it until the final group is rescued (or preyed upon). As with the other two modes, the match can be won if the monster kills off all the hunters or vice versa.



#### THE MAIN ATTRACTION

While players are free to play single rounds of the three aforementioned modes, Turtle Rock has crafted a longer, more in-depth experience as well, similar to Left 4 Dead's campaigns. Evacuation mode is a five-round campaign that encapsulates the hunters' attempts to save planet Shear's colonists from the invading monsters. The first round is always Hunt mode, and is played on a randomly selected map.

Unlike most multiplayer games, each of Evolve's 12 levels is a fully realized location, pieced together on planet Shear's overworld map like states on a map of America. After the first round is complete, the winning team gets to choose the next map from two randomly selected neighboring locations.

Additionally, each map-specific objective endows the winning team with a unique bonus in the following round (regardless if the objective was completed). For example, if the hunters win on the Fusion Plant level, the next map they choose will feature automated sentry turrets, powered by the generator they successfully defended. If the monster wins, however, the destruction of the generator causes poisonous radiation clouds to appear on the next map, which harm the hunters and local wildlife.

Another example of a map-specific objective involves a caged Goliath guarded by a stranded transport ship. If the monster wins, the Goliath is freed and fights beside the player on the next map as an A.I.-controlled minion. If the hunters win, the saved captain patrols the skies from overhead, automatically tagging the monster whenever he

spots it. Other bonuses include a med base that provides additional healing to wounded hunters, or teleport gates that make getting around the map a breeze. Because each bonus can be applied to any of the maps surrounding it, Turtle Rock says there are over 800,000 possible permutations for how a campaign can play out.

Rounds two, three, and four follow a similar pattern, with the winning team picking between two of the adjacent maps, and the two modes that weren't just played. For the fifth and final round, Turtle Rock changes up the formula again.

The two teams are pitted against each other in Defend mode, played out on one of four unique maps. The mission: The hunters must defend all of the civilians saved in the previous four rounds as they board the last transport ship off planet Shear. The monster's job is to break through a series of defensive perimeters and destroy the transport's fuel pump, causing a chain reaction that will explode the entire ship, killing everyone. The hunters must protect the ship at all costs. It's an all-or-nothing showdown that rewards the winning team with additional XP for every civilian saved (or killed).

Players may bristle at the thought of a campaign that's composed mostly of multiplayer matches, but like Turtle Rock's Left 4 Dead, the story isn't really the point. The developer's interest and strong suit is creating highly replayable multiplayer experiences: with an overwhelming amount of built-in variety and a structure dictated by player choice, Evacuation mode aims to deliver just that.



## The Final Four

The last tier of human characters require the most experience and skill to be effective on the battlefield. While they may have higher learning curves, mastering their team-oriented abilities will make your squad a force to be reckoned with.

**Name:** Abe

**Class:** Trapper

Abe is the weapons expert of the hunters, and like Han Solo, he always has a smart-alecky quip for his fellow companions. Turtle Rock says Abe and Parnell are BFFs, so you can expect plenty of joking and arguing between the two characters.

### Abilities:

*Custom Shotgun:* Unlike most video game shotguns, Abe's primary weapon isn't just a close-quarters weapon. The faster Abe fires the gun, the wider the pellet spread is, allowing him to take down nearby enemies with quick successive blasts, or hone in on distant enemies with slow, methodical shots.

*Tracking Dart:* Abe's tracking darts highlight the monster on impact, allowing other hunters to spot the beast through obstacles for an extended duration. However, Abe can also shoot wildlife, including corpses of animals or even other hunters. If the monster eats one of them at any time during the round, it will also become highlighted.

*Stasis Grenade:* Less of a grenade and more of an energy-dampening orb, this throwable item binds any beast caught in its radius with electric shackles, making it slow and heavy. Stasis grenades are also sticky, allowing them to be placed on cliffs to prevent the monster from climbing to safety. They can even pull the Kraken right out of the air.



**Name:** Parnell

**Class:** Assault

The last member of Evolve's assault class, Parnell grew up reading comic books and dreaming of being an action hero. Planet Shear's recent monster attacks have given him the opportunity to save the day, and his enthusiasm for battle is matched only by his firepower.

### Abilities:

*Multi-fire Rocket Launcher:* This fully automatic rocket launcher can unleash a volley of five rockets in a matter of seconds. Unlike Bucket's missile launcher, however, Parnell's explosives don't have any kind of built-in guidance system, so you must factor in the monster's movements and the slow velocity of your rockets when lining up shots.

*Combat Shotgun:* Parnell's second weapon is a double-barrel shotgun equipped with two high-capacity ammo drums. The combat shotgun can deal out plenty of damage, but the wide spread requires getting uncomfortably close to the target.

*Super Soldier:* Parnell's final ability sets his mechanical suit into overdrive, allowing him to run faster, jump higher, and shoot and reload his weapons at a super-human pace. The added speed means he can stay toe-to-toe with a fleeing monster, but the ability takes its toll, depleting Parnell's health by 20 percent every time he uses it. Teaming up with a medic is a good idea.





## Name: Cabot

### Class: Support

As the captain of the dropship players start in Cabot recruited a lot of the other hunters to aid planet Shear's civilian population. Cabot is the leader of the hunters and is the person they all look up to.

#### Abilities:

**Rail Cannon:** This extremely powerful, single-shot weapon can blast clear across the map. Even more impressive, the projectile will penetrate almost any object and travel an additional 40 meters, allowing Cabot to shoot the monster through canyon walls and buildings, provided he knows where the beast will be.

**Dust Tagging:** Enter Cabot's second ability. Similar to Hank's Orbital Barrage, Dust Tagging allows Cabot to call in an airstrike from above, which blankets an area with radioactive dust. Any creature caught in the settling dust will be highlighted, making it easy for the hunters to track the monster down, or for Cabot to shoot it with his rail cannon.

**Damage Amplifier:** Cabot's final ability is a support tool in its purest form. The beam device doesn't do any damage by itself, but instead doubles the effectiveness of the other hunters' weapons and offensive abilities. Like other support characters, choosing when to assist your fellow teammates or dish out your own damage is a major part of playing Cabot effectively.

## Name: Cairra

### Class: Medic

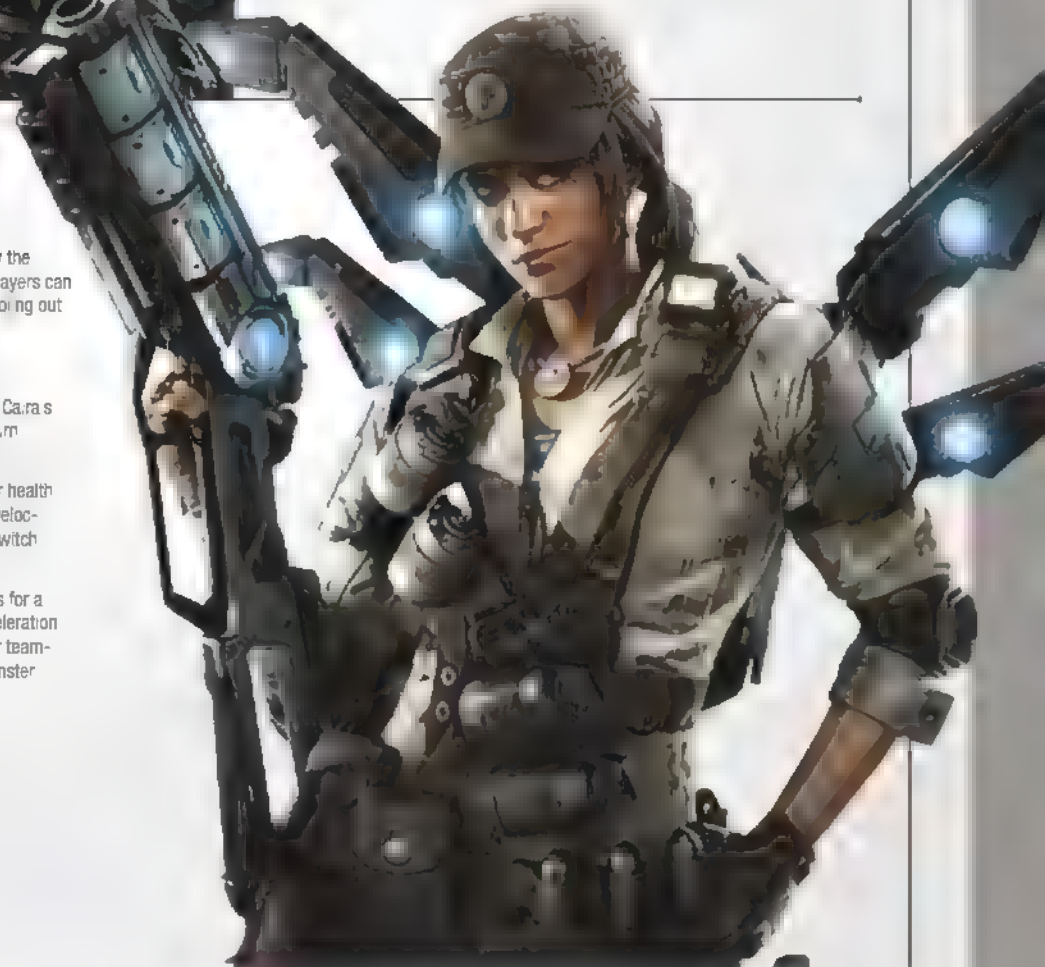
A nerdy biologist first and foremost, Cairra can't help but be fascinated by the bizarre creatures she and her fellow hunters are tasked with stopping. Players can expect Cairra to share her humorous theories about the monsters while doing out health to her comrades.

#### Abilities:

**Napalm Grenades:** The first of two ammo types that can be dispersed from Cairra's grenade launcher, these explosive projectiles deal splash damage and burn enemies over time, requiring less precision than other weapons.

**Healing Grenades:** Cairra's secondary grenades allow her to provide a major health burst to herself and allies alike. The healing grenades feature the same velocity and firing arc as the napalm grenades, allowing Cairra to effortlessly switch between the two during the heat of battle.

**Acceleration Field:** Cairra's final ability allows her to run at increased speeds for a limited amount of time. Unlike Parneil's Super Soldier ability, Cairra's Acceleration Field also affects nearby allies, allowing her to not only catch up with her teammates, but pull them along at superhuman speeds while chasing the monster.





# Halo 5: Guardians

PLATFORM *Xbox One* PUBLISHER *Microsoft Studios*  
DEVELOPER *343 Industries* RELEASE *2015*



With Halo: The Master Chief Collection now available, it's time to look forward to the one piece of content from that package yet to be unlocked. The Halo 5: Guardians multiplayer beta is scheduled to start at the end of December and run through late January. During that time, 343 Industries will collect telemetry to tune maps and balance weapons for the game's release later in 2015.

For Halo 5: Guardians, 343 is tearing down much of what we know about the series' multiplayer components. While Halo has evolved throughout the years with the addition of

dual-wielding, equipment, and armor abilities, this entry goes further to update the gameplay.

Every Spartan in Halo 5: Guardians is equipped with a thruster pack that enables a number of new traversal and combat options. Players can omnidirectionally boost/dodge, mantle onto any ledge, and slow their descent to line up the perfect shot. In combination with a full speed sprint, players can "Spartan charge" into foes, instantly killing them from behind or knocking out their shields from the front. Players can also set up an instant kill ground pound, by jumping from an elevated position.

Successfully executing a melee attack from the sky takes skill and leaves you vulnerable in mid-air while charging.

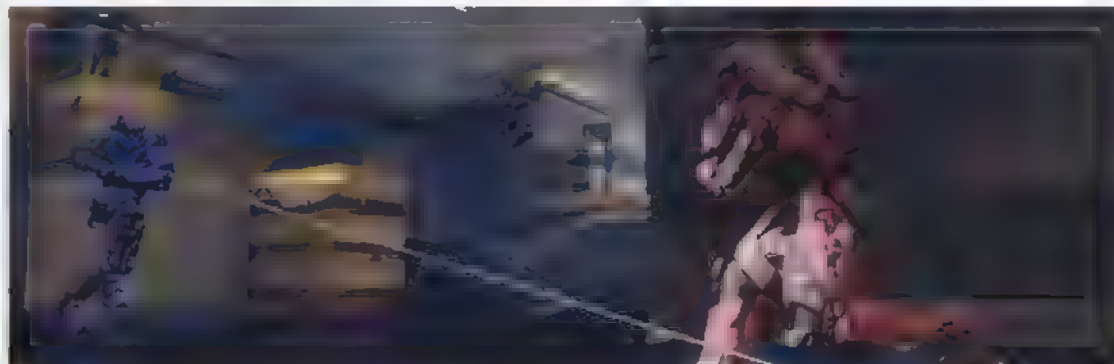
Another major change is the inclusion of "smart scope." Halo titles typically eschewed the aim down sights feature of other shooters (with the exception of scoped weapons). Now, every single firearm (and melee weapon) can take advantage of this targeting mode. There's a drawback, though: Getting hit "descopes" you, forcing you to line the shot back up. There's no movement penalty when linking your HUD to your weapon, and guns are still just as lethal from the hip.

Shields have been tweaked as part of the balancing act with the new unlimited sprint feature. There is a visible timer above your shield bar that winds down toward your recharge. Sprinting resets that, forcing you to find cover and slow down in order to recuperate fully.

We had the chance to play two modes and three maps during our beta preview. Team Slayer is as chaotic as you remember it, with additional strategy added thanks to more clearly defined power weapon spawn points. This creates more emphasis on map control, as players look to lock the opposing team out of those zones.

Teamwork is aided by the new chat filter feature. In-game characters call out enemy positions based on easily identifiable zone names. These locations are listed above the minimap and are designed to be simple, like "blue street," "red yard," "house," or "stage." It's possible to work with players off mic thanks to A.I. callouts.

Truth, a mid-sized map inside a Covenant ship, and Empire, a rooftop battlefield with both indoor and outdoor lanes, felt like traditional Halo maps. They were a touch too large for eight players, but they also provided avenues for escape, stealthier options for attacking from above, and even a





legendary weapon called "Prophet's Bane," an enhanced Elite energy sword with longer lunge range.

Developer 343 Industries is focusing the beta on eSports, particularly with the inclusion of a new mode called Breakout. We experienced this on the small, paintball course like Crossfire map. In this four versus-four mode, players have one life per round and lethality is drastically increased. The winning team scores a point, with the first group to score five rounds coming out the victors.

Rounds play extremely fast, lasting as little as a minute. Teamwork and communication are key, and we quickly learned to lean on the zone names to call out enemy movement. We suspect that Breakout will do for Halo what Kill Confirmed did for Call of Duty: provide a new home for players that might not otherwise gravitate toward multi-player.

This is just some of the content planned for the three-week beta. 343 Industries tells us that the experience will evolve over that period, with balancing and tweaking to happen from week to week. When it's all over, 343 will go back to the drawing board with all of your play data in-hand. As for us, the long wait will begin until the Halo 5: Guardians launches later next year.

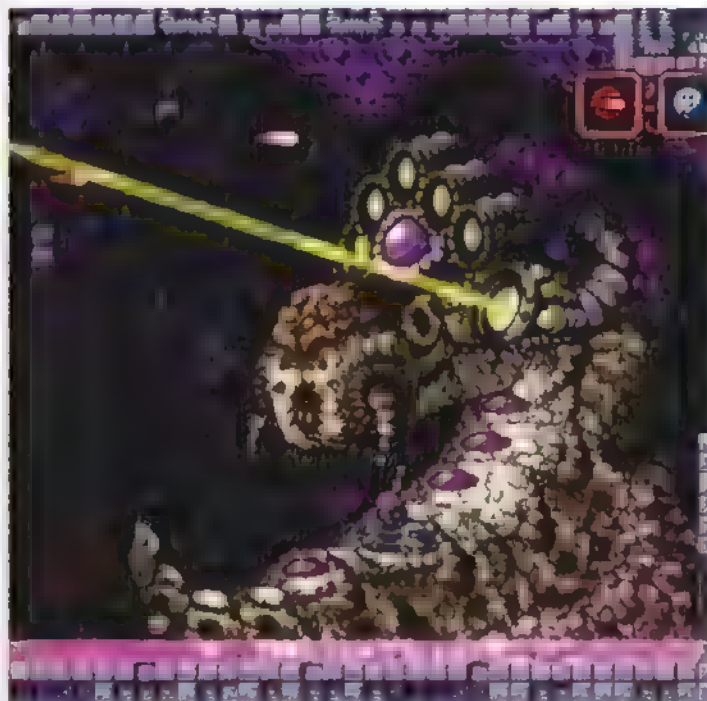
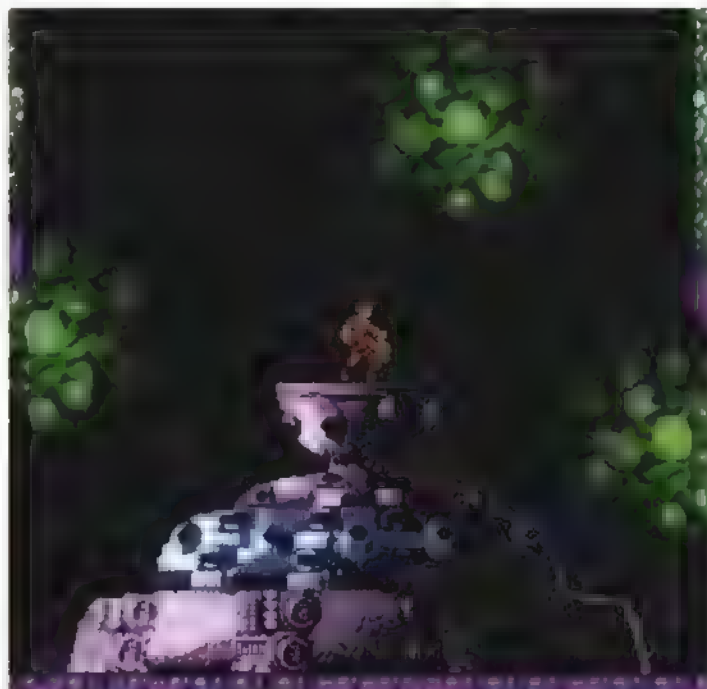




## Axiom Verge

PLATFORM *PlayStation 4 • Vita • PC* PUBLISHER *Sony Computer Entertainment*  
DEVELOPER *Tom Happ* RELEASE *2015*

The impressive passion project of a single motivated developer, Tom Happ has been working on *Axiom Verge* for five years, handling every aspect of development from design to music composition. It's the love-child of *Metroid* and *Contra* and good old-fashioned 16-bit gameplay. Players take on the role of Trace, a character who wakes up on an abandoned futuristic world, tasked to unearth new weapons and power-ups. *Axiom Verge* also incorporates glitches into the gameplay to further push the computerized aesthetic of the science fiction world.



## Battleborn

PLATFORM *PlayStation 4 • Xbox One • PC* PUBLISHER *ZK Games*  
DEVELOPER *Gearbox Software* RELEASE *2015*

In a universe where stars are being snuffed out by a mysterious dark force called the Varelse, sentient robots and an assortment of alien races form factions to battle for control over the last thriving solar system. Gearbox has crafted elaborate backstories and histories for all of the races, as well as motivations for all of the factions as they duel one another in a never-ending war. The colorful universe doesn't look out of place next to *Guardians of the Galaxy* or *Star Wars*, while wholly embracing technology and space travel in its core narrative. The gameplay is a unique blend of genres, touching on traits from MOBAs and first-person shooters.



## Mighty No. 9

PLATFORM *PlayStation 4 • Xbox One • Wii U • PlayStation 3 • Xbox 360 • Vita • 3DS • PC*  
PUBLISHER *Comcept* DEVELOPER *Inti Creates, Comcept* RELEASE *2015*

Reiji Inafune is credited as one of the most important creative forces behind *Mega Man*, but he left Capcom to pursue a life of independent development. His studio, Comcept, has its hand in a number of games, but all eyes are currently on *Mighty No. 9*. A spiritual successor to *Mega Man*, *Mighty No. 9* stars a robot who shoots horizontally and appropriates the weapons of his defeated enemies.

## Mirror's Edge

PLATFORM *PlayStation 4 • Xbox One • PC* PUBLISHER *Electronic Arts*  
DEVELOPER *DICE* RELEASE *TBA*

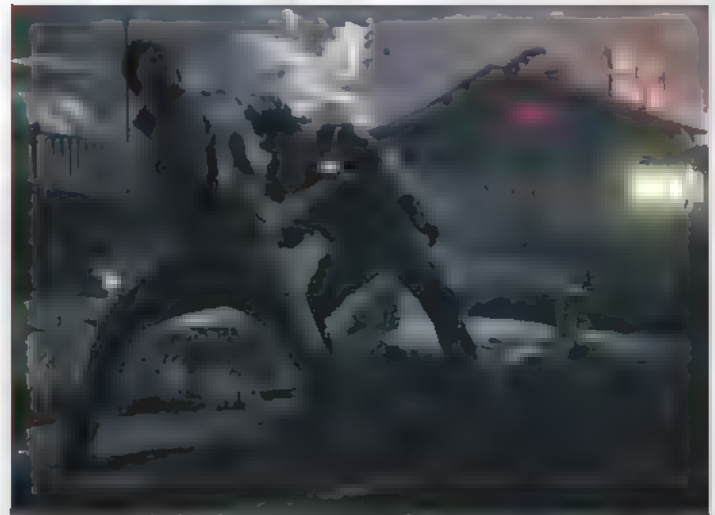
When you think of *Mirror's Edge*, you think of first person parkour. What's typically ignored is the well-crafted science-fiction universe. It eschews the popular post-apocalyptic future in favor of a well-maintained, but oppressive police state where the government controls every aspect of daily life. Not much is known about the sequel other than it serves as a prequel to *Mirror's Edge*. Developer DICE hints that this entry takes place in an open-city setting with a younger Faith in the lead role.



## Quantum Break

PLATFORM *Xbox One* PUBLISHER *Microsoft Studios*  
DEVELOPER *Remedy Entertainment* RELEASE *2015*

Developer Remedy Entertainment explored heavy-handed noir storytelling with *Max Payne*, and tackled the psychological supernatural mystery thriller with *Alan Wake*. For its next title, the studio is diving into the world of science fiction, and is experimenting with an accompanying live-action show modeled after traditional television. *Quantum Break*'s protagonist wields the power of time manipulation, which he can tap to pause time to easily evade a hail of bullets. Remedy consulted with a theoretical physicist to ground this fiction in some form of science.

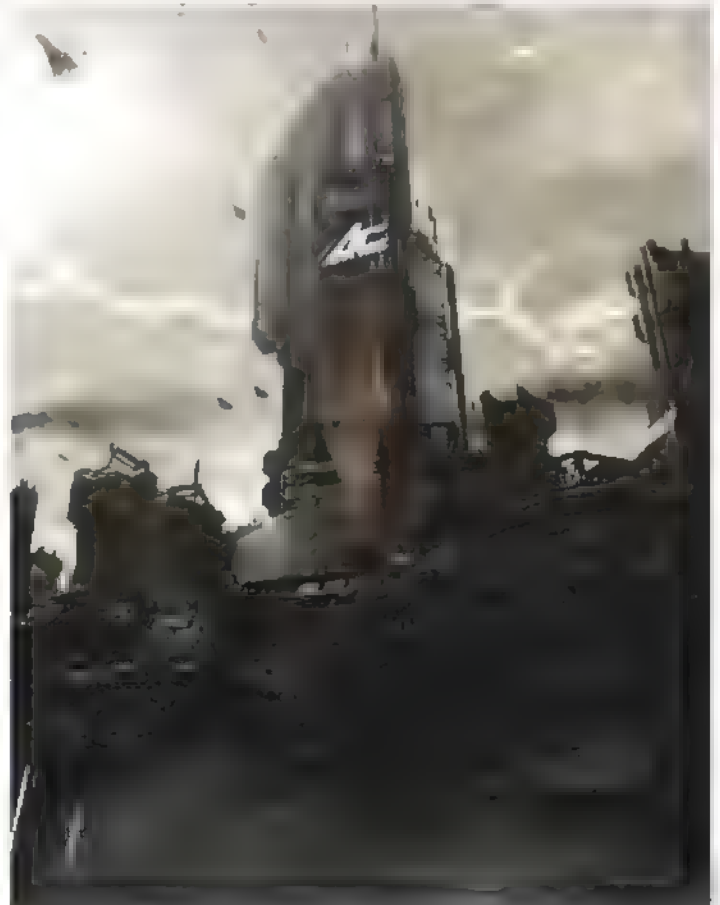




## Routine

PLATFORM *PC* PUBLISHER *LunarSoftware* DEVELOPER *LunarSoftware* RELEASE *TBA*

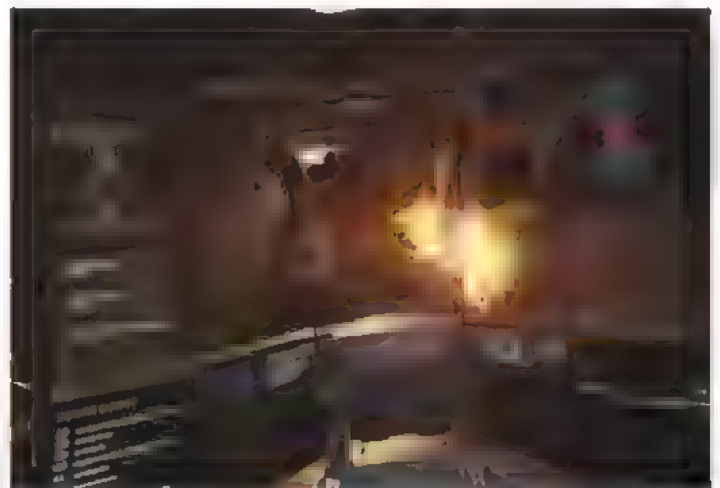
In most science-fiction stories, moon bases never stay inhabited for long. *Routine* follows this cliché, tasking the player to investigate the quiet halls of a lunar station while manipulating computers and the environment to uncover the mystery at hand. It's a dark atmosphere, and all you have is a night vision display to see what lurks ahead. Taking clear inspiration from *Alien*, *Routine* is an undeniably creepy experience as something inhuman follows in your footsteps.



## Star Citizen

PLATFORM *PC* PUBLISHER *Cloud Imperium Games*  
DEVELOPER *Cloud Imperium Games* RELEASE *2016*

**S**tar Citizen is an ambitious, long-term project fueled by over \$60 million in crowd-funding. Developer Cloud Imperium Games is making a habit of unveiling gawk-worthy additions to Star Citizen's gameplay package, including on-foot FPS action, and a sprawling industrial cityscape. Players can freely walk around the interior of their ships which look to be as large as the *Millennium Falcon*. The funding continues to pour in, and the scope of the project continues to grow.



# Star Wars Battlefront

PLATFORM *PlayStation 4 • Xbox One • PC* PUBLISHER *Electronic Arts*  
DEVELOPER *DICE* RELEASE *2015*

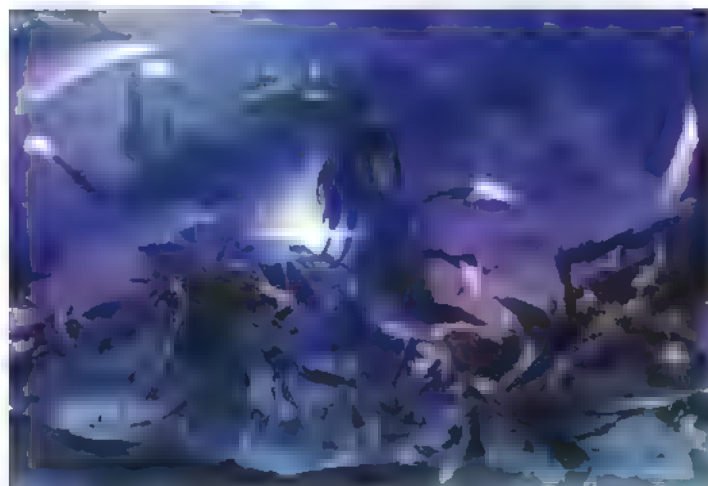
When Electronic Arts teamed with Disney to create Star Wars games, everyone hoped DICE, the team behind Battlefield, would create a new entry in the popular Star Wars shooter series. DICE apparently felt the same way, reportedly breaking out in applause when the studio was told it would be working on the next Battlefield game. Two E3 teaser trailers point toward this Battlefield experience taking place in the classic trilogy era, potentially recreating its biggest showdowns like the Battle of Endor and the snow battle on Hoth.



# StarCraft II: Legacy of the Void

PLATFORM *PC* PUBLISHER *Blizzard Entertainment*  
DEVELOPER *Blizzard Entertainment* RELEASE *TBA*

StarCraft has served as Blizzard's science-fiction arm for more than 15 years. The studio is arguably better known for its fantasy games like Warcraft and Diablo, but for those who prefer firing plasma over magic, StarCraft has always been available. Legacy of the Void is an extension of StarCraft II, but in typical Blizzard fashion, it promises enough content to be considered a sequel by most standards. New units and multi-player modes join a sizable campaign that serves as the conclusion to the StarCraft II trilogy.



# Xenoblade Chronicles X

PLATFORM *Wii U* PUBLISHER *Nintendo*  
DEVELOPER *Monolith Software* RELEASE *2015*

From the development studio that created the highly regarded (but underplayed) Xenoblade Chronicles for Wii comes Xenoblade Chronicles X for Wii U. Despite the similar name, X is a spiritual successor to Xenoblade Chronicles. Taking place in 2054, Earth is quickly becoming uninhabitable, forcing humans to leave in gigantic interstellar ships. One ship's journey to re-establish humanity crashes on an alien world. As luck would have it, this planet could be habitable, if humans can overcome the indigenous monsters that roam the landscapes.





# The TOP 25 *Science Fiction Games*

Ever since *Galaxy Game* and *Computer Space* kicked off arcade gaming, players have been enraptured with sci-fi video games. Over the years, the window dressing of alien invasions has given way to rich universes and intriguing what-if scenarios built on the principles of science fiction. We've explored distant planets, befriended and fought alien species, and traveled through time. The following list represents our favorite experiences the genre has to offer.

When deciding what titles qualified for our list of the top 25 science-fiction games of all time, we followed a simple guideline: They should all be great games in their own right, and use science fiction in a meaningful way. While "meaningful" may be subjective, we whittled down our definition of science fiction by excluding games that focus on magic, super heroes, or the supernatural. While some entries may still contain one or more of these elements, the core of the game should still be rooted in science.

In order to provide a more well-rounded and interesting selection of games, we are only including one (and, in our opinion, the best) entry per series.

by GI Staff



## Homeworld

PLATFORM PC PUBLISHER Sierra Entertainment  
DEVELOPER Sierra Entertainment RELEASE 1999

Homeworld was not only a spectacular space real-time strategy game, it was also the first fully three-dimensional title to grace the genre. The single-player campaign focuses on playing as the exiled Kushan against the Taidan, the tyrants of the galaxy. Players must also take on various encounters like asteroid fields, and other alien races such as the "join us or die" Kadeshi or friendly Bentusi traders. Homeworld's campaign features a persistent fleet, with ships and resources carrying over from mission to mission. In multiplayer, players can opt to play as the Kushan or Taidan.

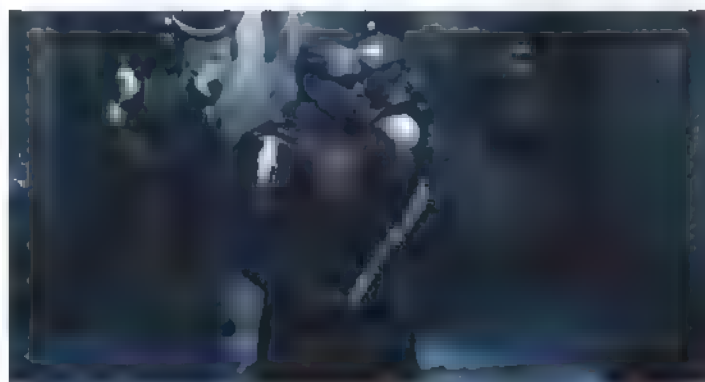


## The Chronicles of Riddick: Escape from Butcher Bay

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PLATFORM PlayStation 3 • Xbox 360 • Xbox • PC • Mac PUBLISHER Vivendi Games  
DEVELOPER Starbreeze Studios/Tigon Studios RELEASE 2004

At release, *Escape From Butcher Bay* made waves as a top Xbox exclusive and a rare high-quality licensed game that was even better than the 2004 *Chronicles of Riddick* movie. Protagonist Riddick is locked up in Butcher Bay prison on a remote planet. He must outsmart and outmuscle both the ruthless prisoners and sadistic guards as he sneaks through various areas of the high-tech complex. After battling a sewer full of mutants, he's granted his trademark eyeshine night vision by a strange old man. The final act trades in the grime for Apple-esque white surroundings of the cryo-sleep triple-max security zone where Riddick enlists some robotic help to escape.



## Ratchet & Clank: Up Your Arsenal

23

PLATFORM PlayStation 2 PUBLISHER Sony Computer Entertainment  
DEVELOPER Insomniac Games RELEASE 2004

Science fiction tends toward the dramatic, but there's also a strain of lightly comic sci-fi aimed at younger people. The best of it, like Pixar's *Wall-E*, appeals to all ages. Insomniac's *Ratchet & Clank* series is squarely in that tradition. *Ratchet & Clank's* action/platforming adventures were perfected with *Up Your Arsenal*, which features outlandish sci-fi weaponry, exotic planets, and colorful characters like the fan favorite Captain Qwark. Insomniac's brand of sci-fi is lighthearted and better for it, allowing them to craft infectiously silly side-missions with a giant-sized Clank and other great setpieces.

## Mega Man X

PLATFORM Wii U • Wii • PlayStation 2 • Xbox • GameCube • SNES • PSP • PC • iOS  
PUBLISHER Capcom DEVELOPER Capcom RELEASE 1994

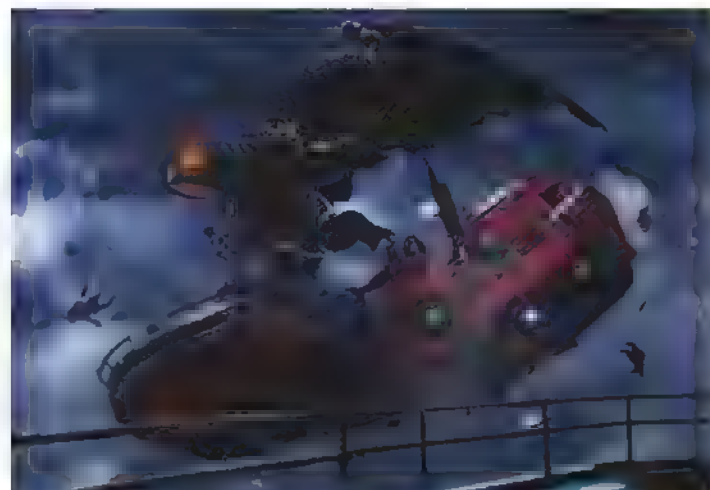
The Blue Bomber's X series is a strikingly different type of sci-fi than the other terrific games on this list, but you don't have to dig deep to discover how it qualifies. Mega Man X takes place in 21XX, nearly 100 years after the original NES series. Since then Dr. Light, the original creator of Mega Man, has passed away. But Light left behind X, who became the prototype for the production of a huge line of robots while he was dormant. When those robots go maverick, it's up to X to destroy their leaders, steal their unique abilities, and turn them against their leader Sigma. Mega Man X moves away from the original series' Saturday-morning cartoon aesthetic in favor of a grimmer robot-apocalypse future.



## BioShock Infinite

PLATFORM PlayStation 3 • Xbox 360 • PC • Mac PUBLISHER 2K Games  
DEVELOPER Irrational Games RELEASE 2013

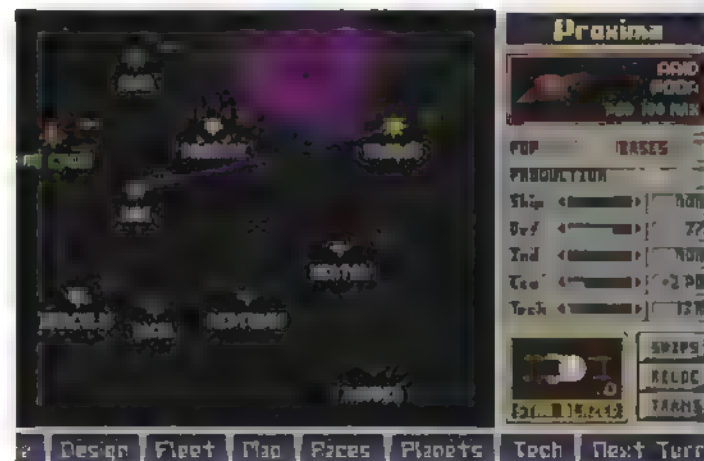
Instead of relying on aliens and laser beams, BioShock Infinite implements a sci-fi vision more in line with author Jules Verne. Set in the early 1900s, floating buildings and massive airships are Columbia's technical marvels, but the story takes players down a mind-bending path of parallel dimensions. What begins as a simple rescue mission becomes a jaunt through alternate timelines and different eras as Booker and Elizabeth manipulate tears in reality and uncover the time and place at the root of Columbia's problems.



## Master of Orion

PLATFORM PC • Mac • Amiga PUBLISHER MicroProse  
DEVELOPER Simtex RELEASE 1993

The turn-based 4X Master of Orion focuses on ship construction, diplomacy, and technology as the player takes on the role of one of 10 races to rule the galaxy. Through a combination of conquest and construction, players must make difficult choices as they develop their bases on randomly generated maps. With many planets to colonize and tech options around every turn, Master of Orion offers a plethora of strategy choices that combine with ships and spies to yield a victory. Wargaming.net currently holds the rights to the franchise, so it's possible we may yet return to Orion.



## Wing Commander II: Vengeance of the Kilrathi

PLATFORM PC PUBLISHER Origin Systems  
DEVELOPER Origin Systems RELEASE 1991

Chris Roberts may be heading back to the depths of space with the ambitious Star Citizen, but the Wing Commander series set the stage for many of today's high-profile space-flight simulators. With cutscenes, a campaign, and even some voice acting, Wing Commander II tells the tale of a full-fledged interstellar war between the Terran Confederation and the Kilrathi. Taking many of the first game's core concepts and combat, this direct sequel adds a layer of polish, and an emphasis on sci-fi storytelling to bring the adventure to life.



## Shadowrun

PLATFORM SNES PUBLISHER Data East  
DEVELOPER Beam Software RELEASE 1993

Much hay has been made over which classic adaptation of the tabletop RPG Shadowrun is better. While we like the Genesis version's open world and action-leaning gameplay, the SNES edition's more focused path, engrossing story, and RPG-style combat gets the edge. The cyberpunk world is clearly inspired by *Blade Runner*, taking place in Seattle in 2050. Trenchcoated protagonist Jake Armitage is gunned down in the streets and wakes up in the morgue with no memory and few clues to go on. He navigates a gritty, futuristic noir game, investigating the mystery of his attempted murder, tracking down the animal-morphing woman who saved his life, and ultimately unraveling a deep conspiracy.

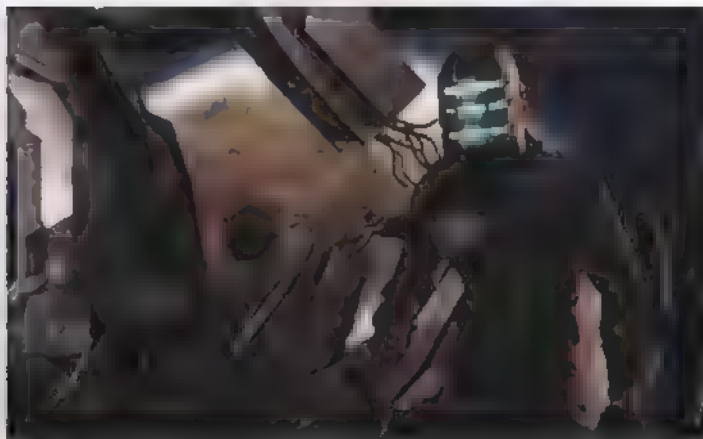


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## Dead Space

PLATFORM PlayStation 3 • Xbox 360 • PC PUBLISHER Electronic Arts  
DEVELOPER Visceral Games RELEASE 2008

John Carpenter's *The Thing* and Ridley Scott's *Alien* are widely considered the best sci-fi horror movies of all time. It makes sense then that Visceral Games' *Dead Space* received acclaim for twisting and mutating the DNA of those classic films into this harrowing thriller. The *USG Ishimura* "planet cracker" spaceship's dark, steam-filled corridors are crawling with necromorphs that burst from vents, bringing to mind Ripley's ordeal aboard the *Nostromo*. Terrifying spacewalk sequences sell the deep space horror even harder, with players trekking across the ship's exterior, exposed to the muted void of space as their oxygen slowly tickles away.



## Chrono Trigger

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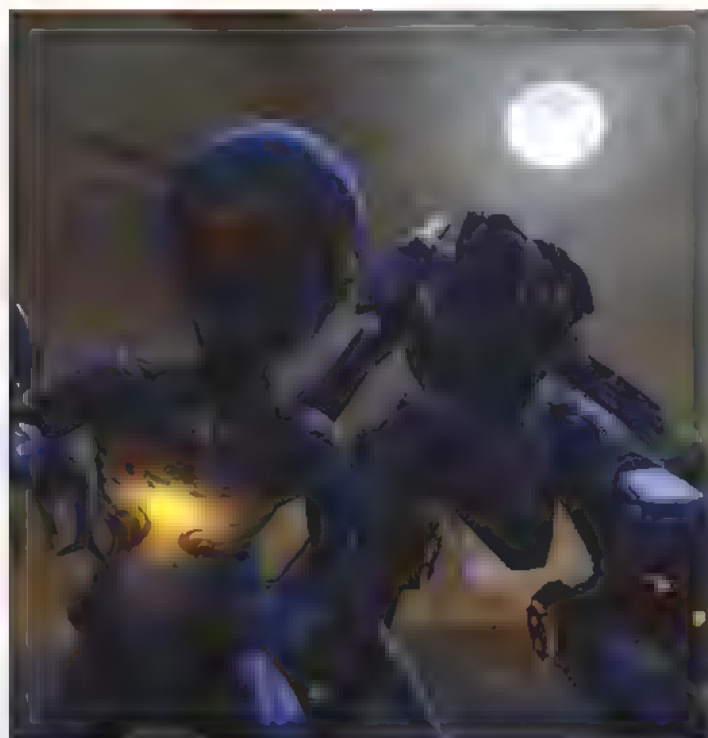
PLATFORM Wii • SNES • DS • iOS • Android PUBLISHER Square  
DEVELOPER Square RELEASE 1995

*Chrono Trigger* remains one of the most beloved RPGs of all time, but it also serves a thrilling sci-fi adventure. The epoch-spanning story allows you to visit places from prehistory to a post-apocalyptic future where humans and robots struggle to make ends meet. The ability to travel through time is also part of the main mystery, as you search for answers about a strange portal that opened in protagonist Crono's medieval town. As you travel to different periods, including the End of Time, you must answer a single question: Can you save every era?

## 15 | X-COM: Enemy Unknown

PLATFORM *PlayStation 3 • Xbox 360 • PC • iOS • Android* PUBLISHER *2K Games*  
DEVELOPER *Firaxis Games* RELEASE *2012*

Some games are lucky to have one memorable enemy; X-COM: Enemy Unknown has enough unforgettable villains to man an interstellar spacecraft. Throughout a campaign to save the world, players must cleverly manage a meager supply of resources and stop an endless army dropping from the sky. This task seems daunting when faced with poison-spewing doppelgangers, psychically fueled monsters, and cybernetic hover tanks that rip holes in concrete. Thankfully, players can cut apart these alien invaders in order to reverse engineer some cool new toys and find a reason to hope.



## Star Wars: X-Wing | 14

PLATFORM *PC* PUBLISHER *LucasArts*  
DEVELOPER *LucasArts* RELEASE *1993*

Though some may argue TIE Fighter is the better entry of the series, X-Wing is the space combat sim that kicked off this beloved tangent to the Star Wars series. Join the Rebel Alliance to perform critical escort missions, attack capital ships, and of course dogfight TIE Fighters with X-wings, A-wings, and Y-wings. As you earn medals and increased your status in the starfleet, you gain better A.I. wingmen to fight alongside you. If Elite: Dangerous and Star Citizen prove successful, we hope Disney takes that as a sign to resurrect this classic.





## Eve Online

PLATFORM PC PUBLISHER CCP Games  
DEVELOPER CCP Games RELEASE 2003

**E**ve Online has created a massive universe featuring over 7,500 star systems. While CCP has provided all the backstory behind the moons, planets, and asteroid belts that make up the huge world, players have created their own stories and history that shape the past, present, and future of the universe. From titanic corporations that rule space with an iron fist, rogue pirates seeking prey on the outskirts of civilization, and skilled craftsmen running off with ships that take hundreds of hours of resource collection to create, diplomacy and deception are key components of this ever-evolving, player-driven MMORPG.

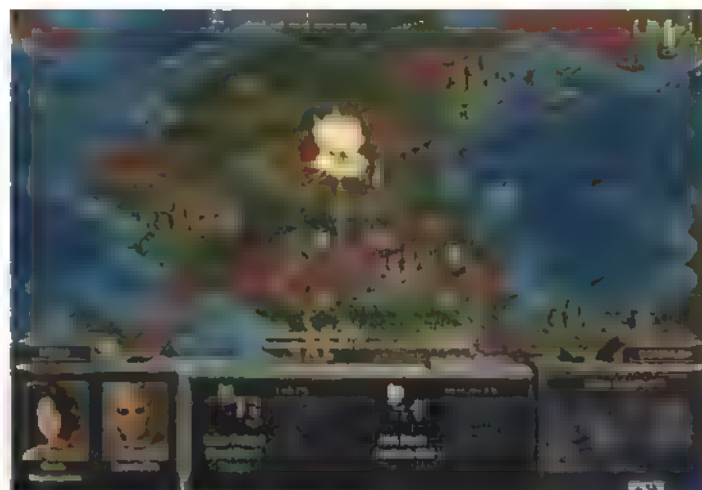


## Xenosaga Episode 1: Der Wille zur Macht

12

PLATFORM PlayStation 2 PUBLISHER Namco  
DEVELOPER Monolith Soft RELEASE 2003

**X**enosaga will always be known as the RPG series that challenged just how long a cutscene can last, with many running for 20-plus minutes. Thankfully, the grand sci-fi tale is worth watching: Mankind has left Earth, but dangers lurk the galaxy in the form of Gnosis, deadly spirits targeting humans. The first game introduced us to Shion, an engineer and creator of gynoid KOS-MOS. KOS-MOS is programmed to adhere to logic and is the best weapon humanity has against the Gnosis. However, it's Shion and KOS-MOS' growing relationship that becomes the most interesting thread. Can a robot have any humanity?



## Alpha Centauri

11

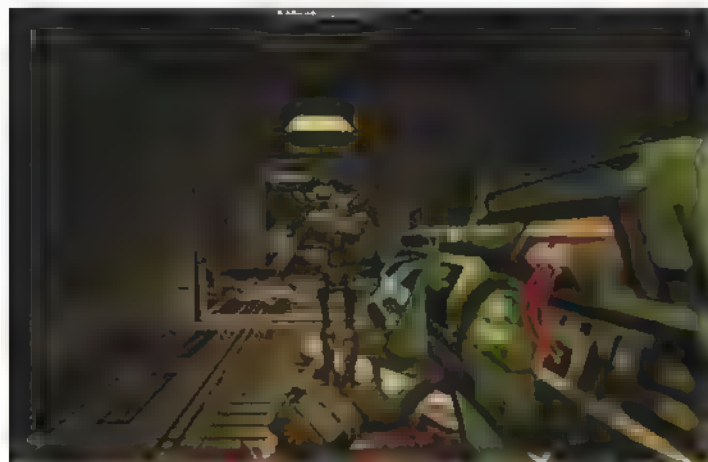
PLATFORM PC • Mac • Linux PUBLISHER Electronic Arts  
DEVELOPER Firaxis Games RELEASE 1999

**L**ong before the Civilization franchise ventured into the depths of space, Sid Meier's band of 4X all-stars explored uncharted territory with this classic turn-based strategy game. Set in the 22nd century, human colonists must deal with a hostile and unpredictable environment as they compete to colonize a far-off planet. Integrating alien lifeforms, customizable units, and greater factional diversity proved a smart move, as this extraterrestrial game is still remembered as one of the best Firaxis games ever.

## System Shock 2

PLATFORM PC • Mac PUBLISHER Electronic Arts  
DEVELOPER Irrational Games, Looking Glass Studios RELEASE 1999

Technology can be dangerous, so who's to say it can't turn on us? This possibility was explored in the System Shock games, featuring one of the most memorable villains: a rogue A.I. named SHODAN. SHODAN is hell bent on destroying humanity, and her shocking return in System Shock 2 reveals her ultimate manipulation of players. Set about 100 years in the future, you must explore a special spacecraft, the *Von Braun*, the first ship in history capable of faster-than-light travel. Here you must challenge a perfect, immortal machine, you pathetic creature of meat and bone.



## Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic

08

PLATFORM Xbox • PC • Mac • iOS PUBLISHER LucasArts  
DEVELOPER BioWare RELEASE 2003

The Star Wars franchise spans practically every form of media, but in the world of video games, it doesn't get better than Knights of the Old Republic. BioWare's interpretation of this sci-fi juggernaut ticks off every important item of the Star Wars checklist: lightsabers, Force powers, a *Millennium Falcon* analogue, and a cybernetic Sith lord bent on galactic domination. With an epic story spanning multiple worlds, this RPG immerses players in the unique fiction and cool tech of the Star Wars universe like no other.



## StarCraft

PLATFORM N64 • PC • Mac PUBLISHER Blizzard Entertainment  
DEVELOPER Blizzard Entertainment RELEASE 1998

Once the Earth's overpopulation reaches critical mass, the less savory members of the human race look for more elbow room in the stars. Unfortunately, they immediately come into conflict with some of the most hostile life forms in the galaxy, resulting in a series of world-spanning wars fought by three distinct alien races. One of the most impressive aspects of StarCraft's supremely balanced real-time strategy is the fact that all of the factions operate under unique rules and use their special talents in clever ways.







07.

## Fallout 3

PlayStation 3 • Xbox 360 • PC PUBLISHER Bethesda

DEVELOPER Bethesda RELEASE 2008

Videogames have no shortage of post-apocalyptic settings, but none are as fully realized as the ravaged wasteland of *Fallout 3*. From the moment you step out of Vault 101, you're given complete freedom in how you explore the remnants of a destroyed Washington D.C. Makeshift civilizations like Megaton and The Republic of Dave pepper the landscape, offering players disquieting visions and tongue-in-cheek humor in equal parts. *Fallout 3* draws inspiration from the best elements of iconic movies such as *A Boy and His Dog* and *Mad Max*, while carving its own identity with alternate technology like the Pip-Boy 3000, Fat Man nuke launcher, and your own snide robo-butler, Wadsworth. Fans have spent years anticipating a *Fallout 4* announcement for a reason — despite the bleak surroundings, we can't wait to return to Bethesda's sci-fi masterpiece.

PLATFORM *PlayStation 3 • PlayStation 2 • PC • Mac* PUBLISHER *Eidos Interactive*

DEVELOPER *Ion Storm* RELEASE *2000*

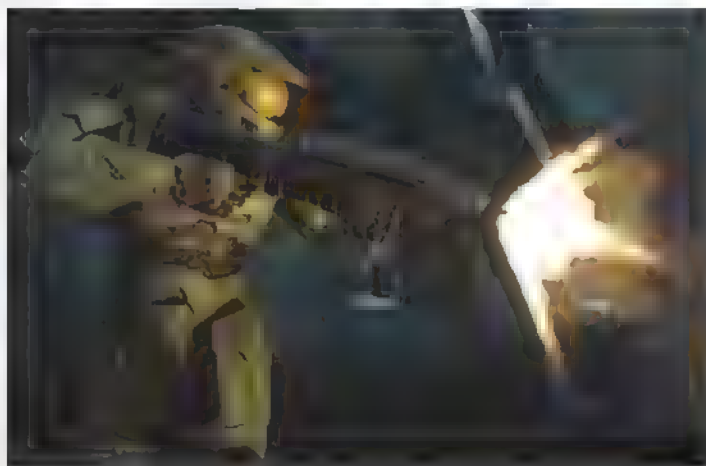
Widely considered one of the best PC games of all time, *Deus Ex* skillfully blends first-person shooting, role-playing mechanics, and player choice into an immersive hybrid package. Taking place in the year 2052, the near-future setting was grounded in modern political intrigue but augmented by advanced technology like anti-terror operatives modifying their bodies with nanotechnology and rogue artificial intelligences. Fueled by global conspiracy theories and power-hungry corporations intent on ruling with an invisible hand, this dystopian future was as poignant as the gameplay.



PLATFORM *Xbox One • Xbox 360 • Xbox • PC • Mac* PUBLISHER *Microsoft Studios*

DEVELOPER *Bungie* RELEASE *2001*

It may have been presumptuous for Bungie to place the subtitle "Combat Evolved" in the title of its game before the public got its hands on it, but after *Halo's* release, nobody doubted its inclusion. Along with giving gamers a reason to need an Xbox and inspiring console-shooter mechanics for years to come, Bungie established an expansive science-fiction universe with an intimidating alien race fueled by religious zealotry. *Halo* also set a high standard for extended universe fiction in the realm of video games and continues to inspire devout fandom even after the franchise changed hands to a new development studio.



PLATFORM *Wii U • Wii • SNES* PUBLISHER *Nintendo*

DEVELOPER *Nintendo/Intelligent Systems* RELEASE *1994*

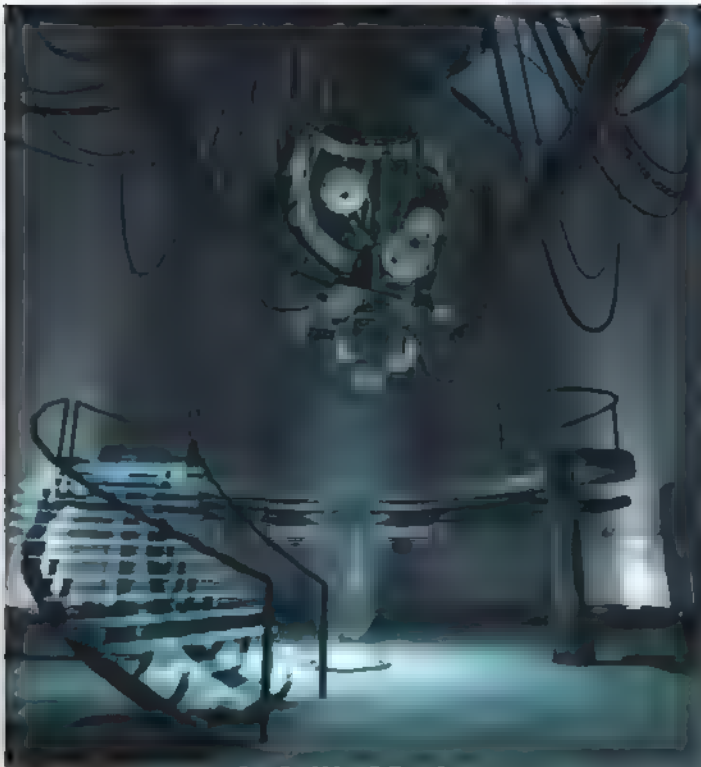
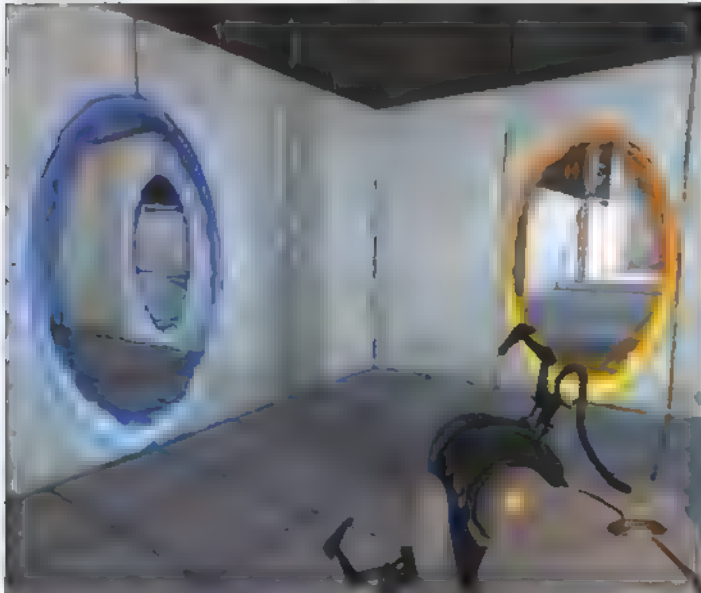
Younger players may know her best for her fighting moves, but Samus Aran was a renowned bounty hunter before she entered the *Smash Bros.* circuit. Her Super Nintendo adventure remains one of the most well-regarded games on the platform, earning kudos for its atmospheric soundtrack, exceptional level design, and memorable enemies. Don't spend too much time worrying about the mechanics of Morph Ball; instead focus on how it, along with the rest of her varied arsenal, allows her to explore the hostile planet Zebes, tearing through titanic bosses and making a few unlikely allies along the way.



# Portal

PLATFORM PlayStation 3 • Xbox 360 • PC PUBLISHER Valve  
DEVELOPER Valve RELEASE 2007

Science fiction is entertainment, but it's also been the way for writers to express humanity's fears about the changes brought by technology. Valve makes these fears immediate and personal in its brilliant *Portal*, which uses a simple game concept and minimal presentation to create the indelible tale of protagonist Chell and her uneasy relationship with the A.I. GLaDOS. As you use carefully placed dimensional portals to traverse a series of puzzle-like test chambers, GLaDOS begins to reveal her malevolent intentions. While inspired by Stanley Kubrick's 2001: *A Space Odyssey*, *Portal*'s darkly comic take on sci-fi storytelling is truly unique.



## Half-Life 2

02

PLATFORM PlayStation 3 • Xbox 360 • Xbox • PC • Mac PUBLISHER Sierra Entertainment & Valve  
DEVELOPER Valve RELEASE 2004

Some games try to hit us over the head with their narrative. *Half-Life 2* immerses us in a world and lets us participate in a story. After a group of fool-hardy scientists rips open the space-time continuum, a multidimensional reg me sets up shop in our planet's capitals. Tongue-tied scientist Gordon Freeman emerges into the alien-occupied City 17 and quickly partners with the resistance to fight two-story, walking mechs, razor-sharp drones, and a haunted district full of giant face-hugging spiders. With *Half-Life 2*, Valve showed us a fully realized sci-fi universe without having to tell us much about it.





01

## Mass Effect 2

PLATFORM PlayStation 3 • Xbox 360 • PC PUBLISHER Electronic Arts

DEVELOPER BioWare RELEASE 2010

In a genre as established and popular as science fiction, familiar concepts often resurface in compelling ways. The Mass Effect series takes cues from classic sci-fi films like *2001: A Space Odyssey* and *Blade Runner*, but builds on that foundation with plenty of unique twists. Inventive alien species (like the Quarians and Krogan), sleek technology, and a fascinating take on psychic powers (in the form of biotics) form an unforgettable universe with the indomitable Commander Shepard at the center. Having three full games to delve into the lore is an advantage, but Mass Effect 2 stands out as the best entry thanks to the incredible cast and clear-cut story structure.





gameinformer

★ GAME OF THE MONTH

## 94 Super Smash Bros.

Nintendo's brawler impressed us last month on the 3DS, but Super Smash Bros. on Wii U is even better. With new modes, new stages, and eight-player matches that add to the series' anarchic rush, this is the Smash game that fans have been waiting for. It should come as no surprise that it's our game of the month.

### THE SCORING SYSTEM

10	Outstanding. A truly elite title that is nearly perfect in every way. This score is given out rarely and indicates a game that cannot be missed.	5	Flawed. It may be obvious that the game has lots of potential, but its most engaging features could be underutilized or not integrated into the experience.
9	Superb. Just shy of gaming nirvana, this score is a high recommendation because the game reviewed is head-and-shoulders above its competition.	4	Bad. While some things work as planned, the majority of this title either malfunctions or it is so dull that the game falls short as a whole.
8	Very Good. Incredible, but perhaps not the right choice for everyone. This score indicates that there are many good things to be had, but arguably so.	3	Painful. If there is anything that's redeeming in a game of this caliber, it's buried beneath agonizing gameplay and uneven execution in its features or theme.
7	Average. The game's features may work, but are nothing that even casual players haven't seen before. A decent game from beginning to end.	2	Broken. Barely playable. This game is so inefficient in execution that any value would be derived in extremely small quantities, if at all.
6	Limited Appeal. Although there may be fans of games receiving this score, many will be left yearning for a more rewarding game experience.	1	No climbs. Gold medals!

### AWARDS

gameinformer PLATINUM	Awarded to games that score between 9.75 and 10
gameinformer GOLD	Awarded to games that score between 9 and 9.5
gameinformer SILVER	Awarded to games that score between 8.5 and 8.75
gameinformer ★ GAME OF THE MONTH	The award for the most outstanding game in the issue

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Let's  
Go  
Places



# Grand Theft Auto V

Intimate violence

9.75

PLATINUM

Style 1-Player Action (30-Player Online) Publisher Rockstar Games Developer Rockstar North Release November 18 Rating M

PS4 • Xbox One

## » Concept

A re-release with a new lease on life. Viewing Los Santos and its crazed action from the first-person perspective makes this experience feel new again

## » Graphics

The game looked stunning on Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3, but is even more of a sight to behold on the new-gen machines thanks to the increased resolution, draw distance, and multitude of touches to the lighting and world

## » Sound

The same great voice acting for Trevor and company. The big addition: more than 160 new songs added to radio stations

## » Playability

The first-person perspective ups the intensity of action and immersion with the world. The side effect: The restrained view makes the game more challenging

## » Re-release

Playing the game again from the first-person perspective is a blast. It's also become my perspective of choice for Grand Theft Auto Online

## » Replay Value

High

On February 28, 1998, Grand Theft Auto hit the North American market, giving gamers a bird's-eye view of a gangster's world overrun with violence, drugs, and an alarming number of civilians crushed by runaway cars. Although the characters looked like arts from the game's top-down perspective, players became immersed in the open-world chaos, praising its unique gameplay and freedom of choice. The diminutive violence from that first Grand Theft Auto title created a rock-solid foundation for a series that was about to revolutionize gaming—all through the switch of a camera.

Shifting to the third-person perspective in 2001's Grand Theft Auto III reinvented this series, serving as the idea viewpoint for developer Rockstar North's biting commentary. In a year filled with companies re-releasing games on new-gen hardware, the return of Grand Theft Auto V on PlayStation 4 and Xbox One may not sound like big news, but this new version contains another significant breakthrough for the series—one that once again involves the position of the camera.

Players now have the option to trek across Los Santos and Blaine County in first person. Zooming into the eyes of Trevor, Michael, and Franklin delivers a remarkable sense of intimacy for all of the actions in the game, be it driving, skydiving, swimming with sharks, or running down a darkened alley with a pistol drawn as the police give chase.

The first-person view is more than a simple camera switch; it's a fully realized component that delivers a new experience for GTA players. Rockstar created thousands of new animations to deliver a sense of realism from this viewpoint. When hotwiring a car, the camera pans down to show the character working the wires under the steering wheel. When Franklin lights up at his mom's house, his hand and his weed touch the screen for each long drag. All phone usage shows the character's hands moving across the touchscreen. When Trevor's temper flares, his middle finger is flipped in the center of the screen. All of the actions from this perspective look fantastic, and deliver that same high level of quality seen throughout the remainder of the game.



When the action heats up, the first-person view ups the intensity and difficulty. Given that this perspective limits awareness of the character's surroundings, I found I had to be more cautious in firefights. I also wasn't as skilled while driving, since the vehicle's frame obscures the view, and it's far more challenging to thread the needle between cars when the camera positioning can't be altered on the fly. That said, I enjoyed both avenues of play more from the first-person perspective. Aiming down the iron sights of a gun is easier than lining up the tiny white dot for a headshot. The sense of speed tied to driving is far greater, making uncontrolled descents down the mountain on a motorbike a terrifying affair.

The new viewpoint is optional, activated with the press of a button. It offers a host of settings to tweak, including aim sensitivity, control schematics, head bob, and the ability to zoom out to third-person while using cover (a recommended switch, since using cover properly is difficult in first person).

This version of the game also boasts a bevy of graphical improvements, including a 1080p resolution, greater draw distance, better textures, and an array of new lighting and atmospheric touches. The streets are loaded with more vehicles and pedestrians, and the wilds

are denser in fauna and home to a handful of new animal types.

Players continue to uncover new content and secrets. Racing now consists of fun stock car events, which reward the player well with new muscle cars decked out in the decays of Los Santos' biggest brands. Franklin now boasts a wildlife photography side activity, and Michael is intertwined in a new murder mystery, which, as of this writing, no one has solved. A hatchet and rail gun up the number of armaments, and the clunky Dodo seaplane returns.

I spent hours of my life tracking down peyote plants, a new collectible that makes the character hallucinate and transform into an animal for a limited amount of time. During one trip, I played as a coyote that mauled two people to death, made another frightened citizen run directly in front of a trolley, and at the end of his reign of terror, was sent to coyote heaven by a police officer.

I can't stress just how much fun it is to experience Grand Theft Auto V again from a new perspective. The impact it has on the series is huge, but is somewhat muted from its debut in a re-release and not a new entry in the series. I went into this review expecting to play the same game again, and I did, but Rockstar made it feel new. » **Andrew Remer**

## Grand Theft Auto V

The enhancements for the single-player campaign transfer over to Grand Theft Auto Online. The multiplayer component has expanded to include 30 players, and the first-person perspective breathes new life into the action. In my time online, I experienced minimal lag in the expanded firefights and races. If you played the last-gen versions, your online persona (and everything you've earned) can transfer to the new iteration no matter which platform you're playing on, so you can upgrade without losing progress



# Far Cry 4

New setting, familiar trail



Style I-Player Shooter (10-Player Online) Publisher Ubisoft Developer Ubisoft Montreal Release November 18 Rating M

## 8.75

PS4 • Xbox One  
PS3 • 360 • PC

### » Concept

Take the Far Cry 3 formula to the Himalayas and add a half-baked co-op mode that only applies to side missions

### » Gameplay

The breathtaking mountain vistas are marred by pop-up, which is worse than many last-gen games like Grand Theft Auto V

### » Sound

Cliff Martinez's Tibetan-influenced score perfectly sets the mood for the unique setting

### » Progression

Carrying over the polish from Far Cry 3, the weapons handle well. I wish I could say the same for the vehicles, which can be tricky to drive on the default settings without independent speed and directional controls

### » Entertainment

The rich setting is fun to explore, but the familiar gameplay experience doesn't stray far from Far Cry 3

» **Replay Value**  
Moderate

The Far Cry series, while generally being well-regarded over the course of its three main entries, hasn't stuck to a particular formula when it comes to story or mechanics. Each game is set in a postcard-worthy open-world setting, and allows you the freedom to approach objectives with tactics of your choosing, but little else carried over from title to title. That boldness of vision stops with Far Cry 4, which is content to riff off the successes of its direct predecessor. The setting and characters may be different, but the rhythms of the experience stick to a familiar tempo.

Replacing the insufferable ducebro one-percenter protagonist from the last game is Ajay Ghale, an American who returns to his fictitious home nation of Kyrat to spread his deceased mother's ashes. He doesn't even get across the border before being drawn into the civil war between the established dictator Pagan Min, a silver-tongued maniac who wouldn't be out of place hosting *Project Runway* or starring in a Tarantino film, and a rebel group known as the Golden Path, which excels more at in-fighting than it does inciting revolt. Ghale becomes the tip of the spear in this war for the nation's soul, single-handedly turning the tide in favor of the rebellion while its alleged leaders argue between ideals of progressivism and traditionalism.

Unfortunately, that choice ultimately boils down to bad or worse, since both Golden Path leadership candidates stubbornly cling to extremist ideals. This makes it hard to root for either of them. Ghale's perspective, on the other hand, is tough to grasp. He thankfully spares you the groan-inducing one-liners and general unlikability of his predecessor, but his personality is vacant—a cipher for the player to project onto. This approach fails largely because you have minimal control over shaping his trajectory. Whether you want to or not, Ghale spends time with a curious cast of characters, including a dopey duo of druggo backpackers, a Bible-verse-spouting gun-runner many may remember from Far Cry 2, and other unsavory elements that make you question what kind of person he is and where his motivations truly lie.

Its leaders and expats may be hard to stomach, but the faux-Tibetan country of Kyrat is the

true star. This gorgeous and varied open world mimics the vibrant tapestries of the region, brightly colored with mysticism, intrigue, and danger. Venturing into a largely uncharted territory for open-world games, Far Cry 4 transports players to a Himalayan setting pockmarked with winding roads, treacherous mountain passes, and snaking river lands. A destitute nation with few natural resources outside of its poppy fields, religion and political turmoil have a strong hold over the region, with Royal Army outposts everywhere and gorgeous Leshan-sized Buddhas carved into mountainsides.

The square mileage of this open world feels similar to Far Cry 3's Rook Island, but traversing the region is made easier with the inclusion of a gyrocopter and a grappling hook you can use to climb over elevated terrains instead of going around them. The copter became my preferred method of transportation, largely because the cars are difficult to handle on the default settings. Narrow roads and drastic elevation changes make driving hard enough; the Halo-like driving controls that give you no independent control for direction or speed of travel make it much harder. If you run into trouble on the road, however, you can turn on the new autodrive feature or switch to a more traditional control scheme in the settings.

The Himalayan setting is breathtaking, but some pervasive cosmetic technical hiccups can take away from its majesty. Coming over to the new-gen systems, the Dunia engine developed originally for Far Cry 2 is showing its age, especially when it comes to draw distances. While you're flying across the landscape or speeding down a road, expect a heavy dose of pop-up.

The countryside is packed with activities to pursue, though most of them are familiar to those who played Far Cry 3. The major open-world activities revolve around capturing outposts, gaining control of radio towers, hunting animals to gain crafting materials, and performing your typical assortment of escort, hijack, and assassination missions. Animals don't just serve as dangerous deterrents in the open world; you can also hop on an elephant to wreak havoc on enemy encampments. The variety and volume makes it easy to get

distracted as you make your way to the next objective. And too frequently I gleefully explored the question marks that pop up on the map or had fun using bait to turn a wild animal onto a nearby enemy patrol instead of speeding to help the cause of the Golden Path. In these moments, the game shines brightest.

Players can call in a friend to help with the side missions, but don't expect a challenge or much depth. With the main missions limited to a single player, the only options duos have are the easy-to-complete side missions. Even capturing fortresses, which are essentially souped-up outposts, is a breeze with two capable guns on your side. Cruising through an open world with a friend is fun—I just wish there was more dedicated content or that we could share the entire adventure together.

A deeply entrenched progression system lies at the heart of every action you perform in Kyrat. Whether you are sticking to story missions or helping out Kyrati citizens in need, everything feeds back to the skill tree, weapon unlocks, or cold hard cash you can use to buy weapon attachments, pay guns for hire, or upgrade the Ghale estate with amenities like a helipad. These perks provide just enough incentive to keep you engaged in the open world.

The multiplayer tries to preserve the open feel of the campaign with large maps, but when only 10 players are sometimes vying for three objectives on a big map, the matches can be filled with down time during traversal. The concept, which pits the Golden Path army against a band of mystical warriors who can use invisibility and control of animals to compensate for their lack of modern weaponry, would have greatly benefited from a larger player pool, dedicated servers, and a richer progression loop.

The half-baked co-op is disappointing and the game sticks to the conventions of its direct predecessor almost to a fault, but the wondrous Himalayan setting packed with activities still makes Far Cry 4 a trip worth punching your passport. Come for the gunfights, and stay for the vicious honey badger hunts. » **Matt Bertz**

This review pertains to the PlayStation 4 version. The game is also available on Xbox One, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, and PC.





# Lego Batman 3: Beyond Gotham

Identity crisis

7.5

Style 1 or 2-Player Action Publisher Warner Bros. Interactive Developer Traveller's Tales Release November 11 Rating E10+

PS4 • Xbox One • Wii U  
PS3 • 360 • PC

## » Concept

A deep dive into DC Comics' universe tainted by excessive world exploration and out-of-place celebrities

## » Graphics

Holds true to past incarnations, except for the miniaturized worlds, which show off Traveller's Tales' impressive artistic skills to recreate cities with fewer bricks

## » Sound

A wonderfully diverse collection of music – from Wonder Woman and Batman's TV themes to a powerful orchestrated score for the action. The voice acting is a mixed bag. Troy Baker is great as Batman. Gilbert Gottfried is a questionable *Mxyzptik*

## » Playability

Suit transformations take some time, but the auto-switch functionality saves a few seconds of menu navigation. The hunt for hidden characters is more rewarding this time around, as they are sewn into levels

## » Entertainment

A hefty experiences that bounces all over the place, but is still strong at its core

## » Replay Value

High

In the same way DC Comics' heroes struggle to keep their normal lives separate from their masked alter egos, *Lego Batman 3: Beyond Gotham* suffers from an identity crisis. Within this game, super hero adoration gives way to celebrity worship. Linear level designs become open worlds. Batman's voice changes from Troy Baker to Adam West. And although Batman's name is in the title, this is really Robin's story; he gets the most screen time and draws the biggest laughs. This shotgun blast of conflicting ideas delivers mixed results, turning Traveller's Tales' ambitious design into a somewhat mystifying experience.

It succeeds where it should: the super hero content. Players are taken on a deep and wonderfully executed exploration of DC's universe. Current happenings, like Superman and Wonder Woman's budding romance in *New 52*, give way to content pulled from the 1960's *Batman* TV series. Fan favorites like *Batman: The Animated Series*, *The Dark Knight Returns*, and even Christopher Nolan's take on the Caped Crusader are included in some capacity.

With over 150 characters to unlock, and many levels taking place far off of Earth, Traveller's Tales scripts a fun dive for comic book fans, but the wealth of content comes at a price.

Conan O'Brien, the late-night talk show host playing himself, is a constant threat. No, he isn't the antagonist to Batman and Robin. Like a soapbox prophet without a job, Conan lurks in almost every room of the hub worlds. Initially, I loved the idea of this amusing personality providing intel about the Batcave and Watchtower, but he says the exact same thing each time a room is entered, and by my 30th visit, he was still spouting those lines. I eventually muted the volume in the hub worlds.

Kevin Smith also yuks it up from time to time. His dialogue is more cringe-inducing than Conan's, but at least his role is limited and mostly left in the shadows. Adam West is fine in his role as a character in peril in each level, but his audio is often mixed louder than everything else, sounding terrible. Al told, the star power hurts this experience and detracts from the hero content in weird ways. Kevin Smith speaking on behalf of Man-Bat? No thanks.

When celebrities aren't thrust into the spotlight, *Lego Batman 3*'s story shines, even with Robin in the leading role through most of it. He's written as a dumb kid (a really, really dumb kid) with a big heart who believes he can save the day, no matter what he faces. Batman has little patience for Robin, and genuinely comes across as hating him, setting up great banter between these two characters. Big laughs are also tied to the Flash and Cyborg's strange antics.

The conflict the heroes face is of the intergalactic variety, uniting the Dynamic Duo with the Justice League and the seven Lantern Corps against Braniac, a robotic villain plotting to shrink Earth to the size of a shelf-bound collectible.

This tale unfolds across a nice variety of locations, including Gotham, the Batcave, the Fortress of Solitude, the Hall of Justice, and a handful of different alien worlds. The best stages, which rank among my favorites across all of the *Lego* games, take place in shrunken cities. The heroes are essentially giants in these levels, smashing cars and buildings with little effort. The linear stages offer plenty of visual variety, and are nicely paced, especially for completionist runs through the stages. I'm a big fan of unlockable characters becoming a part of the collectible hunt. Scavenger

missions for Bat-Mite (Roger Craig Smith) are also welcome additions.

When *Lego Batman 3* breaks free from the linear level designs, bad things happen, especially in the bonus stages located on the seven Lantern planets. Each serves as a small open world, offering plenty of ground to cover, but are small enough to see the spherical horizon. These worlds are filled with simple and repetitive tasks like ring races, collect-a-thons, and more ring races. The game is huge as-is, and throwing in these sizable distractions makes the experience daunting in a bad way. They become a grind. Adding Daffy Duck (in his Green Loontern disguise) as the guide on each world doesn't help.

Little has changed to Traveller's Tales' long-running gameplay formula, but I did find suit transformations to be unnecessarily slow (showing a brief animation each time). Additionally, some of the interactive prompts are spotty, forcing me to move my character to reestablish a connection. Most of the puzzles are well done, and it's always fun to see the attention to detail and artistry tied to the transforming objects. The act of smashing *Lego* constructs and gathering studs hasn't changed since the first *Lego* game, but it's still just as much fun now as it was back in the day.

Although celebrities overstay their welcome, and some of the bonus content can be a hassle to track down, Traveller's Tales crafted another solid super hero adventure in *Lego Batman 3: Beyond Gotham*. Next time, I'd like to see more screen time given to the heroes, and less to a talk show host who isn't even good at video games. » **Andrew Reiner**

*This review pertains to the Xbox One version. The game is also available on PlayStation 4, Wii U, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, and PC.*

# Assassin's Creed Unity

Starting from scratch

Style 1-Player Action (4-Player Online) Publisher Ubisoft Developer Ubisoft Release November 11 Rating M

At first, I didn't much like Assassin's Creed Unity. As a longtime fan of the franchise, the early hours chafed against my sense of what an Assassin's Creed game should be. Unity is a dramatic departure from what came before in controls, combat, navigation, progression, and difficulty. However, the more I let go of the idea of what it should be, the more I could enjoy it for what it is. Unity is a fresh start, and while many new features lack polish, the game is massive, the story is sophisticated, and the missions are open-ended. It doesn't get everything right, but Unity is the first step toward revamping a franchise in increasing need of new ideas.

Unity abandons the sailing and wilderness exploration of recent installments, putting the focus on a huge urban recreation of 18th-century Paris and Versailles. The great churches and palaces are rendered with painstaking care, and the many lush interiors exhibit extraordinary detail. The streets thrum with activity and life, thanks to the most robust crowd system ever crafted for a video game. The barbaric violence of the French Revolution unfolds in the background, and it's fascinating and horrifying to watch a whole society fall into anarchy.

The exploits of Arno Dorian run parallel to Paris' descent into madness, but our new Assassin crosses paths with the Revolution mostly in passing. Instead, the story is a more personal tale, charting Arno's path into the Brotherhood, and a star-crossed relationship with his childhood sweetheart, Élise. The romance showcases a genuine rapport and chemistry, a dynamic that provides weight and emotion to a second half of the story that would have otherwise felt flat.

The present-day metastory thankfully moves away from the most recent excursions into working for Abstergo, and it feels good to once again be uncovering secret historical data for the Assassins. However, the new angle on modern-day interactions is almost entirely voiceover-driven. It's a shame that

nothing meaningful happens to move forward this once-essential branch of the fiction.

If the sci-fi elements are underwhelming, Arno's adventures try to pick up the slack. An overwhelming amount of mission content awaits discovery. Story missions are smartly paced and varied, and the assassinations recall the roots of the franchise, with open-ended mission objectives that allow players to craft their own path to victory. Paris stories and social missions offer a wealth of additional tasks with real characters and interesting objectives. Slower-paced activities, like the murder mysteries and devilishly challenging Nostradamus riddles, ensure a complete change of scene. The most surprising gameplay comes through the not-to-be-spoiled rift missions. These brief arcade-style experiences are fast and fun, and a feature I hope we see more of in the future.

The missions have little hand-holding, and you're often expected to think creatively and solve problems on the fly. It makes this the most challenging Assassin's Creed title by a wide margin, and it's easy to get frustrated. The higher difficulty is pervasive, including a newly revamped approach to stealth. Guards are far more aware than in previous games, and even new stealth options are rarely enough to keep anyone fooled for long. The combat system values punishment over communicating a sense of power; I like the increased need for observation in fights, and the expectation that I use all the tools at my disposal. However, the absence of reliable counters to devastating ranged shots is infuriating, and sometimes there are just too many enemies to understand what's happening on screen.

The new traversal system is a mixed bag. I adore the new ascent and descent options, which finally make my Assassin move off buildings without any insane leaps. With practice, Arno's parkour abilities outstrip his predecessors, but it takes some getting used to. Unfortunately, all these new moves and animations struggle to connect correctly

with the environment, and I regularly found myself getting hung up on ledges or unable to enter windows.

Every mission and activity is geared toward progression. New skills and equipment unlock all the time, and skill points from mission completions along with earned currency are used to upgrade, customize, and define your version of Arno. The upgrade system is addictive, with both cosmetic and game-changing improvements on the line, but it's easy to feel underpowered early in the game when several of the fundamental skills that you've taken for granted in previous games must be purchased. That's especially true with the all-important locksmith ability, which now involves an ill-conceived minigame.

The option to play cooperative adventures with up to four players is a cool addition, but these missions lack the tuning of the single-player content. With more people comes more chances to get seen, and encounters often devolve into all-out melee brawls. Moreover, bugs run rampant through the cooperative missions, from minor issues with animations to game-breaking inability for players to draw and use weapons. Between heists and story-based co-op missions, there's a lot to engage with here, but you and your friends should enter with an expectation of some problems.

Inordinately long load times, repeated onscreen notifications, and a couple of hard freezes prove that Unity is a complex game that hasn't yet had all of its bugs smashed. However, Unity's frequent missteps are balanced against an astonishing array of engaging content set in a stunning world. Even as I tallied problems, I marveled at the breadth of gameplay and richly realized world. I encourage fans to give Unity a try, and leave your expectations at the door. For both better and worse, Assassin's Creed is moving in a new direction. —Matt Miller

*This review pertains to the Xbox One version of the game. Assassin's Creed Unity is also available on PS4 and PC.*

8

PS4 • Xbox One • PC

## » Concept

Survive the French Revolution as a new assassin climbing through the ranks

## » Graphics

Breathtaking architectural recreations make Paris worth exploring, and the detail on the interiors is stunning

## » Sound

A beautiful score mixes 18th-century instrumentation with a modern aesthetic, and the two voice leads turn in strong performances that play well off of each other (even with inexplicable English accents)

## » Playability

A new approach to navigation and combat makes this the most challenging entry in the franchise, both systems still need work

## » Technical Issues

A thoughtful story with some great missions, but fundamental problems in control, balance, and tech hold the game back

## » Replay Value

Moderate

## Linking Up

Unity is accompanied by several distinct applications outside of the game, and each offers rewards in the main game, but all are optional. A mobile companion app adds some new minigames, an online Initiates program provides additional tasks to complete, and an e-store allows for microtransactions to speed progression.





# NBA Live 15

A step in the right direction, but the rebuild is far from finished

## 5.75

PS4 • Xbox One

### » Gameplay

Concentrate all efforts on shoring up glaring deficiencies on the court

### » Graphics

Improved player models help bring the on-court action to life

### » Sound

Respectable commentary from the booth, but expect some stretches of dead air

### » Playability

The controls generally work well, but sometimes your player takes a jumpshot when you want him to drive the lane

### » Technical Issues

Improvements on the court are hindered by the lack of compelling modes

### » Replay Value

Low



Style 1 or 2-Player Sports (2-Player Online) Publisher EA Sports Developer EA Tiburon Release October 28 Rating E

After last year's dreadful reboot of NBA Live, EA Sports acknowledged its shortcomings while reaffirming its dedication to simulation basketball. That patience will be tested for at least another year, because though NBA Live 15 makes some crucial strides on the hardwood, the series still has a sizable deficit to overcome in the competition against its rival.

Most of developer EA Tiburon's efforts went into improving the moment-to-moment gameplay, and this focus largely pays off. The player models, lighting, crowd, and commentary all take drastic steps forward, and while you still may see the occasional gaffe like a player taking a shot with his back to the basket, these immersion-shattering episodes are minimal. Instead of suffering through an unending parade of technical shortcomings, Live 15 at least looks the part of a new-gen basketball game.

With better understanding of spacing and off-ball movement, the players have a more articulated sense of purpose, largely reacting as you would expect. Strategy has also improved thanks to play diagrams appearing on the court and the ability to send teammates into motion on the fly by tapping the left bumper. However, don't mistake NBA Live 15 for a true simulation—an arcade experience hides under the thin sim veneer. Steals and blocks abound on the defensive side of the court, and I toyed with opposing A.I. defenses like LeBron James taking on a junior varsity player, driving to the basket at will and raining down threes with absurd shooting percentages. If you're looking for a challenge from CPU-controlled teams, look elsewhere. Defeating the opposition by 20-30 points was the norm, even on the highest difficulty. Without any sliders to adjust the challenge, it's easy to learn the A.I.'s tendencies and exploit them.

The controls give you more agency over your team this year, but some areas still need improvement. Sometimes shooters pulled up for jumpers when I intended them to drive to the hoop, they can display a lack of awareness or urgency around loose balls, and the low-post game is in drastic need of more varied shooting animations. Expect to see some hitches in transition animations, and clipping is still a problem both on the perimeter and in the paint. Fouls happen more frequently than in most basketball games, which I liked, but players are fouled when shooting from beyond the three-point arc too frequently.

With so much emphasis placed on improving fundamentals, it seems EA spent little time on enhancing the game modes. Both Dynasty and Rising Star are underdeveloped. Dynasty

checks off all the core competencies, but its easy-to-exploit scouting, shallow progression, and inability to trade future picks or sign players to extensions during the season keep it from appealing to sim fans. Rising Star suffers from a camera that doesn't always follow the player, a simplistic grading system that fails to take into account more nuanced ways players affect the game, and questionable rotation logic that regularly left my star player on the bench in the fourth quarter of close games even though I was the leading scorer and had a strong grade.

Given these shortcomings, the best way to experience NBA Live 15 is online. Head-to-head seasons give you something to work for while playing with regular rosters, and obsessing over building the perfect team in the engaging (and potentially spendy) Ultimate Team mode is fun when you can find an opponent. The latter isn't as fully featured as its EA Sports counterparts, missing divisional rankings and granular search tools (like a way to triangulate searches around particular skills), but at least it has an auction house this year. With the majority of hoops fans playing NBA 2K15, the population pool for Live is understandably small. When I did find matches, the performance was stable. EA also likes to tout its Live Seasons mode, which recreates challenges from recent NBA games for players, but these shallow one-off scenarios don't appeal to me.

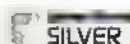
NBA Live 15 may not be ready to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with its competition, but with much improved presentation and mechanics the series is trending in the right direction. The remaining gameplay issues and lack of mode depth, however, makes it tough to recommend this particular version. **—Matt Bertz**





# Pro Evolution Soccer 2015

A hopeful start to a new campaign



Style 1 to 4-Player Sports (22-Player Online) Publisher Konami Developer PES Productions Release November 11 Rating E

## 8.5

PS4 • Xbox One  
PS3 • 360 • PC

» **Concept**  
Step onto the new-gen stage with a full complement of modes and improving gameplay

» **Graphics**  
Player faces look fine standing still, but they turn unnatural when expressions are added. The lighting can lack nuance and make faces look waxy

» **Sound**  
Commentary sticks to the game at hand instead of referring to past matches or any larger context. It does the job but does not stand out

» **Playability**  
You can play with as much or as little complexity as you like. Shooting could be more responsive

» **Replay Value**  
The game is definitely better than last year and puts the series in good standing, but it's not a monument for the genre itself

» **Replay Value**  
High

When teams gain promotion to the top division they enter into a brand-new world. They become minnows in an ocean dominated by world-class teams who spend big money and expect to go deep into the Champions League every year. Even though Konami started its upgrade last year on the PS3 and Xbox 360 by using the Fox engine for the franchise, the series' debut on the PS4 and Xbox One is a promotion into a higher tier that demands Pro Evo rise to the occasion.

After years in the wilderness, Pro Evolution's feature set finally has a destination mode. The intricately structured online myClub mode replaces the online Master League, and building your dream team is a rewarding mix of good fortune and hard work. Managers (including some licensed ones) determine your tactical options, wage cap, and the chemistry template which players fit in to raise your overall team spirit. Agents are used to sign players, and multiple agents can be used to get better players or ones that fit more specific criteria. The fun thing is, apart from the parameters you've set by which agents you've selected to

use (like a player's position), you don't know exactly what player you're going to get.

The game has microtransactions, which can provide high-level agents or re-up your players' contracts and fatigue levels, but you can earn enough of the regular currency (GP) that the mode's fun squad-building spirit is not disturbed. Players' stamina recharges if they're on the bench, you can earn GP for in-game actions and in other modes, and you can play matches against the computer (which uses A.I. approximations of real players' teams) or try and climb the divisions structure against others on line. The flexibility and interaction of myClub's moving parts make it challenging, delivering a go-to online mode (there are other online modes as well) for the first time in the series' history.

The offline Master League has undergone changes, but they aren't impressively deep and the mode is not as interesting as myClub. The ability to scout players is nominal, and the mode's one contribution is its expanded negotiation options. You can go back and forth over clubs' transfer fees and players' salaries—

including the option to pay players an appearance fee that affects your team's bottom line. Perhaps more importantly, the expanded roster of licenses includes those for the French and Italian second divisions and real players (on fictional teams) for the English second division, adding some heft to the Master League.

PES 2015's modes are starting to turn the corner, and the gameplay has also made progress, but it's in fits and starts. Player acceleration and dribbling feel good compared to last year, but players can take some unnecessary extra touches, shots can be slow to get off, and winning possession of the ball can be predetermined at times. You can still keep possession while enduring the increased physicality, but on some occasions the collision doesn't register or your challenges have no effect.

A.I. keepers can let in some howlers (particularly down low) and defenses can be suspect, but playing against the computer can be challenging (I recommend playing on the higher difficulty levels) because its ball movement and incisive attacks create a game-within-the-game. Disciplined play saves your hide, and exploring the more complex controls and tactical options are rewarding and help you break down defenses and become a better player. That's what PES is all about.

In that sense, this is a great PES with which to kick off the new systems—it retains its heart while staking out vital new directions. It's not the largest of milestones and it has its stumbles, but it already puts the franchise on more firm footing than in the last generation. —Matthew Kato

This review is based on the PlayStation 4 version. The game also appears on the Xbox One, Xbox 360, PlayStation 3, and PC.





# WWE 2K15

New-gen version blows up in debut match

7

Style 1 to 4-Player Fighting (6-Player Online) Publisher 2K Games Developer Yuke's/Visual Concepts Release November 18 Rating T

PS4 • Xbox One

## » Campaign

Focus the campaign on specific rivalries and introduce a basic new career mode

## » Graphics

New scanning tech means most wrestlers look extremely close to their real-life counterparts

## » Sound

Michael Cole and Jerry Lawler's commentary sounds more natural since the two recorded together

## » Playability

Slight tweaks to the mechanics edge things forward without reinventing the wheel

## » Entertainment

2K Showcase rivalries are presented well, but can't match the spectacle of last year's Wrestlemania matches. MyCareer needed more time in the oven.

## » Replay Value

Moderate

WWE 2K15's first shot on PlayStation 4 and Xbox One makes some long needed tweaks to the formula, but some new elements could use more polish and several content cuts hurt the overall package.

The improved visuals are the first thing to hit you. Thanks to added hardware horsepower and new scanning technology, WWE wrestlers have never looked better (though ugly non-scanned character models stand out). Faces register everything from pain to a cocky smirk. Movement overall looks far more realistic, with added rope interaction and the toning down of cartoonishly fast strikes.

A universal health bar keeps track of all damage (instead of just specific body parts), providing a handy way to track which character is currently ahead. A new stamina meter assigns every move a cost, and can require recharging if you've blown it all and want to perform a big move. This also means wrestlers' movements become slower and groggier toward the end of the match just like in real life. If you don't want to worry about stamina as much, its impact can be minimized in the options.

A new chain wrestling minigame starts off most matches, requiring you to win a rock-paper-scissors hold selection and then find a sweet spot with the right stick before your opponent. It's disrupting at first, but once you get used to it, it's a useful way to score some early damage, and it ensures things don't turn into a suplex-fest right out of the gate. If you don't dig it, you can scale it back or turn it off.

The 2K Showcase mode replaces last year's focus on the legacy of Wrestlemania. The two storylines on display cover the rivalries between

John Cena and CM Punk from 2011 to 2013 and Triple H and Shawn Michaels from 2002 to 2004. In an entertainment medium that always juggles a multitude of storylines at once, it's a nice change of pace to focus on two guys at a time and follow the ups and downs of their rivalries. Not every match feels as important to the story, however, with a few filler Raw entries added to round things out. While I appreciated the break from controlling and battling the same four guys over and over, the epic vibe is lacking in certain matches. This mode is essentially identical to the last-gen version, as is the comparatively meager roster (the most notable new-gen addition is William Regal).

The new MyCareer mode allows you to take a created wrestler from the NXT developmental league through earning the top spot on the WWE roster. The story starts promisingly with voiced cutscenes from real NXT trainer Bill DeMott, but quickly devolves into bland text from former WWE authority figure Vickie Guerrero. Your stats are non-existent to start, so your wrestler controls terribly for quite some time. You mindlessly drudge from one match to the next with a rare, thin, text-based challenge popping up from time to time. I relinquished the NXT title with the promise that I'd get a shot at better belts, but I grinded through Superstars, Main Event, and much of the Smackdown sections of the career before getting any mention of a title shot. You start to at least get more rivalries going in Smackdown, but it's still mostly text combined with brief clips starring your silent mannequin. MyCareer needs more of a produced story to pull players through, and deeper gameplay and challenges

to keep things interesting.

Custom creation takes a huge leap forward with the new logo manager, which allows players to upload and share any appropriate image via the 2K site and place it on their wrestler (rather than relying on a clunky in-game image editor). This makes it easier than ever to create and gather better-looking custom characters and stay up to date on the latest shirts and gear the real wrestlers are wearing on TV. The latter is also helped by the new ability to fully edit real wrestler outfits rather than simply alter the color. Created wrestlers may look better on new-gen, but you'll have fewer to work with as the characters slots have dropped from 100 on last-gen to 25.

Customization also takes a few steps back with the removal of the story designer and the ability to create special moves, arenas, custom divas, and championships. Based on what you prioritize, you'll have to weigh whether the improved imaging tools are worth the sacrifice.

Speaking of cuts, several exhibition match types didn't make the leap to PS4 and Xbox One. Obscure matches like Inferno and I Quit have dropped from one on one while any form of table and ladder matches are missing from 4-person action. Every category is hit by cuts so it's smart to research if your favorite modes have been axed this year, especially if you're a big fan of local and online multiplayer.

This first new-gen edition of WWE 2K15 lays a solid foundation in the presentation and mechanics, but it's hurt by cuts and 2K Showcase and MyCareer in particular need plenty of work before they're ready for the main event spot. —Bryan Vore

## The Last-Gen Difference 7

WWE 2K15 on PS3 and Xbox 360 contains the same 2K Showcase career and legacy modes like WWE Universe, but none of the advances in mechanics and presentation. It doesn't include the new MyCareer mode, and instead features a series of matches focused on up-and-coming NXT wrestlers. Customization didn't lose as many features, but it doesn't support the new ability to import nearly any image and use it in-game. The large selection of exhibition match types from previous years remains intact.





# Lords Of The Fallen

A surprising sleeper

Style 1-Player Action/Role-Playing Publisher Bandai Namco  
Developer Deck13 Interactive, CI Games  
Release October 28 Rating M

SILVER

If you've played From Software's Souls series, you're at an excellent starting point for Deck13 Interactive and CI Games' *Lords of the Fallen*. It uses almost the exact same combat system, with blocking, swinging, encumbrance, and all of the other aspects that make Souls' action great. Those games provided the clear inspiration for many of the mechanics in *Lords of the Fallen*, but some tweaks and changes add variety and keep it from being a cookie-cutter clone. While it's not as challenging as a Souls game, I had a blast taking on the massive bosses, customizing my weapons, and timing my spells -- the developers have created something special here that I hope to see more of in the future.

Players use experience points to level up magical abilities and core stats, allowing them to use better gear. Experience can be banked and spent at checkpoints, but the more risks you take holding onto them (they drop on death and need to be collected), the greater the rewards. This system isn't as rigid as soul spending; players can find their own comfort level with risk, either playing it safe with gradual progression or gambling for increasingly bigger payouts.

One aspect that distinguishes *Lords of the Fallen* from similar titles is a socket-customization system that allows you to add runes to your weapons and armor. Add poison damage to your sword, magic resistance or added weight allowance to your armor, or other minor perks and nuances to give you an edge in battle. The controls feel tight as you battle a selection of enemies that all have special challenges to overcome. From giant, seemingly insurmountable shields to ghosts and mages, every foe is sure to cause a measurable headache of some kind. That said, by game's end the enemy variety gets stale.

While the game may not have the signature atmosphere that From Software is known for injecting into its compelling environments, *Lords of the Fallen* is visually stunning, and presents players with a clean, crisp interface for selecting gear and magic.

I ran into a few crashes while playing and had some minor quibbles with hit detection at a few points, but thanks to checkpoints being everywhere I didn't lose any real playtime to errors. I also had to walk to and from a few locations to get things to trigger, and there were a few localization typos, but little issues like these were mostly harmless.

*Lords of the Fallen* is a surprisingly solid title that wasn't even on my radar. While it borrows heavily from the Souls franchise, it's done well and with its own signature flair. I highly recommend this game to anyone who enjoys that series, and if you haven't gone down that road before, it might be a more forgiving entry point into the action RPG. **Daniel Tack**

This review pertains to the PC version of the game. *Lords of the Fallen* is also available on PlayStation 4 and Xbox One.

8.5

PS4 • Xbox One • PC

## » Concept

As the criminal Harkyn, take on the titular lords and demons as they threaten the world.

## » Graphics

Majestic lighting and attention to detail results in gorgeous visuals.

## » Sound

Appropriate clanks, blocks, and bashes, plus a solid soundtrack that rises and falls with the action.

## » Playability

Familiarizing yourself with Dark Souls-style combat can be challenging at first, but fans of that series should have no trouble hopping right in and thriving.

## » Entertainment

A combat-rich ride with excellent mechanics and interesting customization.

## » Replay Value

Moderate.

# Lara Croft And The Temple Of Osiris

Raiding is better with friends

Style 1 to 4-Player Action (4-Player Online)  
Publisher Square Enix Developer Crystal Dynamics  
Release December 9 Rating T

7.75

PS4 • Xbox One • PC

## » Concept

Return to Lara Croft and the Guardian of Light's top-down shooting and co-op puzzle solving, but this time add two more tomb raiding companions.

## » Graphics

Top-down games are rarely known for highly detailed environments, and Temple of Osiris doesn't change that, but it looks good.

## » Sound

Lara's voice actress does a good job, but the rest of the cast sounds a little inexperienced. The music is also generic, but if you're playing with friends, you'll be talking over it anyway.

## » Playability

Simple controls and intuitive puzzles make it easy for gamers of all stripes to jump in. Unfortunately, the isometric view makes platforming a little awkward.

## » Entertainment

Like most multiplayer games, Temple of Osiris is better with friends. Thankfully, the game does a good job making each person feel like an integral part of a team.

## » Replay Value

Moderate.

While digging through Egypt's national treasures with a nva. archaeologist named Carter Bell, professional adventurer Lara Croft accidentally unlocks an ancient prison belonging to the god Set. After being imprisoned by his own brother for several millennia, Set is eager to take his pent up frustrations out on the human race. Thankfully, demigod Isis and her son Horus arrive on the scene, eager to help Lara and Carter send Set packing. The script isn't highly original, but neither is the rest of the game. While Temple of Osiris kicks the number of co-op players up to four, the game is largely a retread of 2010's Lara Croft and the Guardian of Light. And I'm okay with that.

Lara Croft and the Guardian of Light took Lara's pre-boot persona and threw her into a co-op adventure where she performed her usual puzzle solving and monster slaying only this time it was from a top-down perspective. Temple of Osiris continues this practice, cleverly scaling the challenges to match up to four players. And the game is a slightly more interesting when you play with friends, as both Lara and Carter have different skillsets than Isis and Horus. The modern day explorers have a grappling hook that allows them to reach new heights or create impromptu tightropes across ravines, while the demigods have magic staffs that surrounded them in energy shields and activate special switches. I appreciated how these different capabilities worked together, and felt like a valuable member of every team as my group used our various tools to overcome myriad obstacles.

Unfortunately, if you played Guardian of Light, you'll recognize many of these obstacles. During my romp to bring down Set, I adjusted a light beam across a maze of mirrors, rolled several boulders over pressure switches, and ran across a series of floor plates that sent spikes shooting through my soles. To be fair, Guardian of Light's puzzles might not feel original, but none of the mechanics felt overused, and I had fun solving all of these puzzles.

Lara Croft and the Temple of Osiris' action feels like a standard twin-stick shooter should, and most of the puzzles manage to remain compelling even with four players in the mix. But aside from allowing a full couch to jump into the game at any time, there isn't anything profoundly original here. I'd like to see Lara continue her top down adventures, but I hope that in the future she finds a new tomb to explore. **Ben Reeves**

This review pertains to the PlayStation 4 version of Lara Croft and the Temple of Osiris. The game is also available on Xbox One and PC.





# LittleBigPlanet 3

Sackboy's new crew

8.5

SILVER

Style 1 to 4-Player Action/Platform (4-Player Online) Publisher Sony Computer Entertainment Developer Sumo Digital Release November 18 Rating E

PS3

## ► Concept

LittleBigPlanet treads familiar ground with some new gadgets and three new playable characters

## ► Graphics

The cloth textures and infectious art style are gorgeous, but the nature of the game's presentation means there's not much of a difference between this and the last PS3 game

## ► Sound

The incredibly diverse selection of licensed music goes all over the map from weird rock to '50s pop

## ► Playability

The basic platforming is dialed in, and the new characters bring a variety of gameplay mechanics

## ► Difficulty/Replay

While some of the novelty is gone, LittleBigPlanet 3 delivers solid 2D platforming along with deep creation tools

## ► Replay Value

Moderately high

Series creators Media Molecule have left LittleBigPlanet for greener pastures, leaving Sackboy's fate in the hands of Sumo Digital, a long running but somewhat undistinguished studio that has specialized in doing ports of higher-profile games. Viewing this as the beginning of the franchise's decline is an easy narrative to latch on to, but LittleBigPlanet 3 is a solid, infectious game that delivers the basics along with some new twists.

Naturally, the very existence of Craftworld is threatened, this time by Newton – a neurotic, power-mad, talking lightbulb in a bowler hat. Like any LBP story, it's a trifle fleshed out by charming dialogue and the series' giddy, patchwork visual style. The narrative is mainly a device by which we meet the game's major new feature: three new playable characters.

Each member of the trio has unique abilities. Oddsock, a dog-like creature, is fast and can run up walls. Toggle is able to switch between large and small forms at the press of a shoulder button. Swoop is a bird capable of flight and daring dives. Sackboy also has some new tricks, including the "pumpinator" (a device that can blow and suck air like the accordion in *Tearaway*), a hat that can grab onto rails, and boost boots. LittleBigPlanet 3 is at its best when it's playing with these new mechanics and characters, especially in two inventive, multi-level challenges towards the end of the game.

I thoroughly enjoyed all the new characters. In fact, I wish the main story mode didn't end so soon after I unlocked them all. While you see the credits roll in around six to eight hours, many side-missions and challenges are waiting to be discovered – not to mention the series' famously comprehensive creation tools. That said, it's not a flawlessly executed experience. At times, the design feels a bit sloppy – am I really performing well, or am I just lucky?



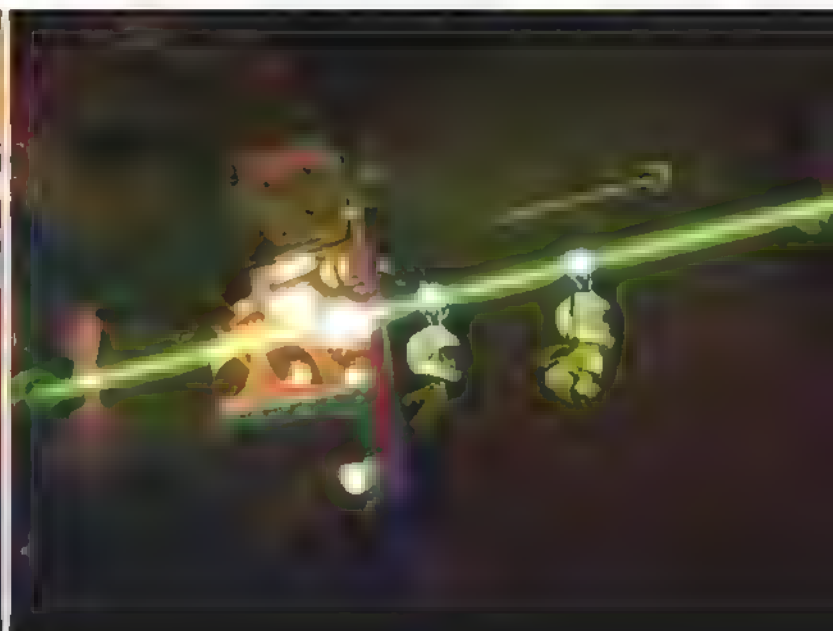
The uneven difficulty curve can also be frustrating; the game is fairly easy until the last fourth of the story mode, which ratchets up the action considerably. For all its inventiveness, LittleBigPlanet has never really delivered memorable boss battles, and that trend continues here.

Of course, if you think you can do better, you have the chance. LittleBigPlanet 3 expands on the already-staggering creation tools of the first two games, which makes it easier to create isometric games, animate and create devices, and more. I'll be honest: this is the fourth LittleBigPlanet game I've reviewed, and I remain completely useless at making levels. If you want a minute-long terrible NES-style platformer with four jumps, I'm your man.

That's not a knock on the tools; they are easy to grasp – and now taught through a series of well-designed "Popit Puzzle" levels

that strike a balance between tutorial and gameplay. Sony let some talented fans in on the game's beta, and already there are some impressive levels, including one based on EA's *Dead Space*, complete with the opening spaceship crash cutscene. People will do great things with these tools – I just won't be one of them. For the lazy or merely dumb like myself, it guarantees that the game will have legs, with a steady stream of new levels and even new types of user-created games.

LittleBigPlanet 3 is a strong showing for Sackboy and company, but one that points to the fact that – unlike Nintendo's Mario, who's been reinvented many times over the years – this series' future is likely to follow the arc of another Sony platformer, *Ratchet & Clank*, by settling into a comfortable groove. As a fan of the genre, I'm fine with that – though this one doesn't make as many waves as the original did back in 2008. » **Matt Helgeson**





## Kingdom Hearts HD 2.5 Remix

Lock yourself away for the winter

**Style** 1-Player Action/Role-Playing **Publisher** Square Enix  
**Developer** Square Enix  
**Release** December 2 **Rating** E10+

9

If you loved last year's Kingdom Hearts HD 1.5 Remix, you're in for even more of a treat this time around. In that package you got the excellent original game alongside the less thrilling Chain of Memories and a movie version of 358/2 Days. For the 2.5 Remix, you get two top games in Kingdom Hearts II and Birth By Sleep and another bad movie.

Kingdom Hearts II serves as the centerpiece of the collection. Like the first Kingdom Hearts, the plodding Roxas intro serves more as something to bust through than relish. I enjoyed approaching it from a new perspective, however, knowing what I do now about his past. When this originally released, the mystery of what's going on pulled you through, but after 358/2 Days it takes on a bittersweet tone. Once Sora's back at the helm, the fun combat and Disney interactions take over, and the experience measures up to my memories of the original.

The improved base gameplay and visuals from the first game make KH II feel closer to a modern title. The Gummi ship levels are better, and creation can be as simple as tapping a blueprint for those lacking creativity or interest. Visual upgrades and the addition of Final Mix content freshen up the experience even for veterans, with new cutscenes, bosses, weapons, items, and tweaks to certain sequences that weren't possible in the pre-patch era.

The previously PSP-only Birth By Sleep looks great with the visual upgrades, and gameplay is improved by full controller support. The story structure involves three characters running through the same worlds from different perspectives with different gameplay, so by the time the last run comes around it loses some luster. Compared to KH II, I prefer BBS's battle system due to more versatile access to special moves and separate cooldowns for powers. Final Mix adds in new bosses and gear along with a cool, challenging level at the end of the game.

The Recoded movie (based on a DS game born from a mobile game) is the worst combination of mind-numbing and long, clocking in at around three hours. At least 358/2 Days sheds light on the story of Roxas and Organization XIII. This just takes place in a throw-away computer universe. The only interesting stuff happens at the very end. Despite this weak link, it's there for completionists and easy to ignore for everyone else.

Kingdom Hearts II and Birth By Sleep offer an incredible amount of quality gameplay. If you're feeling nostalgic or running through for the first time, there's a ton of meat to sink your teeth into that can easily last well into the new year. **—Bryan Vore**

### PSP

#### » Concept

Sharpen up the look and add Final Mix content to Kingdom Hearts II and Birth By Sleep. Recoded is presented as an HD movie.

#### » Graphics

Most textures, faces, and environments look great. Some ugly untouched elements stick out like a sore thumb.

#### » Sound

The voice work and music retain the high quality of the original releases.

#### » Playability

Jumping from Birth By Sleep's limited PSP controls to a DualShock 3 is a welcome step up.

#### » Ambition/Innovation

If you're a Kingdom Hearts fan, you'd be crazy not to buy this loaded package.

#### » Replay Value

High

### A Missing Piece

With this release, Dream Drop Distance on 3DS is the only Kingdom Hearts title without an HD incarnation — though if the credits' tease is to be believed, it's coming at some point.

# Captain Toad: Treasure Tracker

A hidden gem gets the spotlight

**Style** 1-Player Platforming/Puzzle **Publisher** Nintendo  
**Developer** Nintendo **Release** December 5 **Rating** E

8.25

I loved every single one of the Captain Toad levels in Super Mario 3D World, but when I heard that Nintendo was going to spin off this series of minigames into a full retail release, I was a bit skeptical. Could a single-screen platforming minigame (where the main character doesn't even jump) expand into a full retail package? Astonishingly, yes. To my pleasant surprise, Nintendo got an amazing amount of mileage out of this simple concept, and none of Captain Toad's 70+ levels feel repetitive or boring.

Those who played Super Mario 3D World will be familiar with Captain Toad's basic concept, as it hasn't changed much. Princess Peach's mushroom-topped attendant is dropped into a series of floating 3D platforms, usually no bigger than a single screen, and is then set loose to explore, dodge traps, and eventually make his way to a golden star.

The concept is really as simple as that, but there's something charming and irresistible about all of Captain Toad's bite-sized puzzle/exploration levels. Nintendo makes clever use of the Wii U's unique functions, from the touchscreen to the microphone to the tilt controls, without letting them grow stale or feel gimmicky. In one moment, I was running along a series of falling platforms while being chased by ghosts. I also had to rotate sections of a level with my fingers in order to find the best path to the exit. Another moment had me blowing on the Wii U controller to make platforms rise into the air. Every time I thought Captain Toad had run out of tricks, it would throw something at me I hadn't seen before. Some of the mechanics — such as moving across platforms timed to the music — were freely lifted from Super Mario 3D World, but they are used to great effect and fit perfectly into Captain Toad's cute puzzles.

Toad doesn't jump, he doesn't attack, and he doesn't make use of any power-ups (aside from a short-lived pickaxe) and yet Nintendo extracts more entertainment from this character's simple gameplay concepts than I thought possible. Mario isn't featured in this title, but Captain Toad: Treasure Tracker shares the same creative spark that so often fuels games bearing the Mario name. **—Ben Reeves**

#### » Concept

The Mario brothers' constant companion goes on an adventure for treasure while dodging enemies in a series of short, exploration-based levels.

#### » Graphics

If you played Super Mario 3D World, you know what this game looks like. It has some delightfully colorful levels, but it is far from a visual spectacle.

#### » Sound

Nintendo's easy upbeat tunes never tire.

#### » Playability

The controls are so simple that you could easily play with only the two thumbsticks — one to move Toad around and one to move the camera, but this means that Nintendo was able to keep the action tight and engaging.

#### » Ambition/Innovation

Levels are short, and only few of the puzzles are challenging, but they were all rewarding. Little achievements give you plenty of reason to go back to each one.

#### » Replay Value

Moderately high





# Super Smash Bros.

All hail the new champion

9.75

PLATINUM

GAME OF THE MONTH

Style 1 to 8-Player Fighting (2 to 4-Player Online) Publisher Nintendo  
Developer Sora, Bandai Namco Games Release November 21 Rating E10+

## Wii U

### » Concept

Bring Smash Bros. back to the living room in its first console release in nearly six years

### » Graphics

Super Smash Bros. for Wii U is an HD stunner. Bright, crisp colors make it a treat to look at, even when you're falling to your doom

### » Sound

A few audio hitches don't detract from the incredible soundtrack, which is filled with obscure cuts for hardcore Nintendo fans

### » Playability

As responsive as ever, and if you can't find a controller configuration that suits your needs, I don't know what to tell you

### » Contentment

Eight-player matches, loads of challenges, and the best stage designs yet make this a no-brainer for anyone who likes to have fun

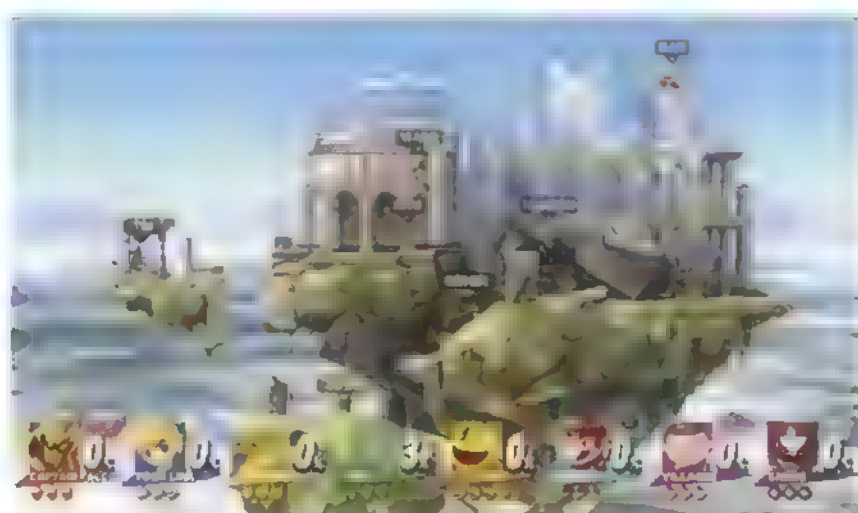
### » Replay Value

High

There are eight of us crammed in the living room, which is now dominated by a rat's nest of cords. After navigating a few menus, we're transported from this chaos to someplace different, but familiar: Onett. New players scramble to get their bearings, and even the veterans pause a few moments to figure out exactly who they are on the jam-packed screen. The initial murmurs of confusion quickly give way to trash talk, groans, and hurrahs, as we all do our best to knock everyone else off the screen. It's over in a few minutes, and we all enthusiastically hit start on our controllers to do it again.

Some of my favorite gaming moments have revolved around the Smash Bros. series, and the latest entry taps into that joy. The series started out as a silly novelty, and while that silliness has remained, the scope of the games has continued to expand. In addition to showing off the "what ifs" of characters from various games fighting in friendly competition, the Smash series has become an ever-increasing compendium of arcane Nintendo lore. While the roster and other extras have ballooned, there's at least one consistency: The mix of recognizable characters like Mario and Pikachu (and more obscure choices like Duck Hunt Dog and Mr. Game & Watch) and easy-to-pick-up gameplay make it one of the best party games I've played. Super Smash Bros. for Wii U takes that a step forward.

Take the eight-player battles, exclusive to the Wii U iteration. Competitive Smash players might sooner enlist in Call of Duty than choose a stage that's not flat and item-free, but that's not the way that most of us play. I always enjoy those moments where you feel like your character's fate is just barely in your hands, despite



the responsive controls. Sometimes you're only one home-run bat or Falcon Punch away from oblivion. That's amplified in these massive battles. You can't pick from the complete list of stages in eight-player mode, but you have plenty of arena available that range from hilariously small to expansive mazes.

While the Wii U and 3DS versions share many of their core components, including customizable move sets, the Wii U pulls ahead in a few ways. In addition to supporting eight players, it features a simplified Mario Party-style board game called Smash Tour. Four players roll a spinner to move around a board, picking up fighters and power-ups that eventually are used in a final battle. It's a nice change of pace, but I would have liked to see the 3DS'

Smash Run make it over, too. Event Mode can be played alone or with a partner, and it pits your fighters against a variety of challenges. You might have to swat 10 ducks out of the sky before they fly away (while an enemy Falco does his best to help his feathered friends), or take on waves of enemies. For the risk takers out there, Special Orders lets you take on challenges cooked up by Master Hand and Crazy Hand; the more you accept, the better your rewards, but you're penalized for failure. Taken as a whole, I appreciate these kinds of diversions (including the returning Target Smash and Home Run challenges), but I find the greatest satisfaction in the game's main Smash mode.

The 3DS' biggest stumble came with its online implementation, and I'm disappointed to say the console release isn't much better. Like its little brother, it can be great fun, with four-way matches against friends and strangers. That is, it can be fun when the framerate isn't reduced to a slideshow pace. Nintendo's insistence on hiding important features doesn't help; there's no way to tell before a match begins if you're playing against someone with a bum connection. It's frustrating, since your experience is at the mercy of someone else's technology. That said, a majority of my online matches went off without a hitch. As annoying as those occasional issues can be, Smash is a couch game at heart. For me, playing against faceless strangers online is no substitution for the social, trash-talking thrill of playing in person.

Even if you aren't able to regularly round up an eight-player posse, there's more than enough great stuff here to keep you busy—both solo or in traditional four-way matches. I've had a great time rekindling old Smash Bros. rivalries from the GameCube era and introducing it to a new generation of players. Its mix of accessibility and deep strategy is remarkable, and it's an instant lock in my party-game rotation. —Jeff Cork

## You're In Control

Players have a wealth of controller options to choose from, including the Wii U gamepad, Wii U Pro Controller, Wii remote, Wii remote and nunchuk, Classic Controller, and Classic Controller Pro. If you own a 3DS, you can use the system as a controller, too. For me, the old way is the best way. Nintendo has released an adapter that allows players to use their GameCube controllers. If you don't have any, they've also reissued the controllers. It was next to perfect then, and that hasn't changed.



For more on using Amiibos in the game, check out [page 18](#)



# Halo: The Master Chief Collection

Raising the bar for remasters



Style 1 to 4-Player Shooter [2 to 16-Player Online] Publisher Microsoft Studios  
Developer 343 Industries, Saber Interactive, Certain Affinity, Ruffian Games Release November 11 Rating M

## 9.25

Halo is an important staple in my appreciation of video games. It taught me that moving a giant tube television and an Xbox to a friend's house for a few hours of LAN multiplayer was absolutely worth the effort. It was a bonding exercise with the neighbors and roommates of my college dorm, and online multiplayer helped us stay connected when we moved apart. I enjoy the series for its solid mechanics, fleshed-out universe and story, and for its ability to bring people together. This collection includes all four core Halo games, perfectly encapsulating what the series has accomplished – and serving as a perfect starting point for anyone who hasn't experienced Master Chief's journey yet.

This collection includes four full games – plus multiplayer for each one. The 2011 Halo: Anniversary remake is delivered with some added tweaks, Halo 3 and 4 have new lighting and other effects, and all the games have a better framerate. Halo 2, however, is the highlight of the collection, and the piece that received the most attention.

Halo 2 looks and sounds like a brand-new game, but expertly retains the feeling of the original. A press of a button swaps you back to the Xbox-era sound and graphics. The visual gap is sometimes laughably striking, but Halo 2 has aged pretty well overall. The cutscenes are where you find the biggest gap, as every single story scene is now a pre-rendered sequence from the prolific and talented animation studio, Blur. Under its direction, Halo 2's story attains a new level of gravitas and scope even when things get really weird – like when the giant talking plant shows up, now looking more like a terrifying monster than a huge puppet.

Halo's campaigns are not without their shortcomings. The level design can get confusing; indoor Forerunner environments are especially bland, and you still backtrack a lot, especially in the first two games. Yes, it gets annoying, but it also lets you watch the campaigns get better and better, showing how far the series has come.

Alongside Halo 2's heavily updated campaign, revisiting the online modes from the inactive

Halo and Halo 2 is a huge draw for many, myself included, and jumping back in does not disappoint. Playing the original Halo online is a surreal experience since it was previously only available in split screen and through LAN connection on Xbox, but I love it. Using the admittedly overpowered pistol against online opponents is a joy, and I can see myself spending a lot of time online with the original Halo's playlists.

Returning to Halo 2's multiplayer is less surreal and more nostalgic. Everything is exactly as you left it in the best way. The remade Halo 2 multiplayer has a number of tweaks, none of which feel out of place or game-breaking. After playing both extensively, I find I enjoy them both and would have been happy with only the remake, but I am overjoyed to have the option to play online exactly as I did in 2004.

The total package of Halo: The Master Chief Collection is massive and intimidating, but none of it is crammed in or hastily included. Even the modes that appeal to a small dedicated group of Halo fans have received attention. The new Forge mode has an impressive collection of tools, including the ability to start from scratch to create a multiplayer arena. Realistically, it's not a mode most players will touch, but it has not been diminished as a result.

Master Chief Collection raises the bar for remastered compilations by allowing players to experience these games as they really were, and how our memory has colored them over the years. Whatever your main incentive for getting The Master Chief Collection may be – replay the story, relive the multiplayer – you won't be disappointed with this revival.

» Kyle Hilliard

### Xbox One

#### » Concept

The core adventures of the Halo universe (and some great multiplayer) collected on a single disc for existing fans to appreciate and new ones to discover.

#### » Graphics

Not all of the games look as pretty as you remember, but seeing the progression from the beginning to the latest entry is an engrossing spectacle.

#### » Sound

The music compositions remain excellent. Halo 2's re-recorded and remixed soundtrack is often more affecting than its visual upgrade.

#### » Playability

Mechanically, the games are presented exactly as they were when they originally released, and they still control incredibly well. The smooth framerate makes the experience feel even better.

#### » Emotional Investment

This is a dense, content-rich package that raises the bar for remakes and re-releases. Whether you want to relive the campaigns or revisit multiplayer, you can find something to enjoy.

» Replay Value  
High





# Pokémon: Omega Ruby & Alpha Sapphire

You might actually catch them all

8.75

SILVER

Style 1-Player Role-Playing Publisher Nintendo Developer Game Freak Release November 21 Rating E

## ► Concept

Remake the Game Boy Advance's Pokémon Ruby & Sapphire with the visual upgrades of X & Y, plus a litany of additions and extras

## ► Graphics

Nearly indistinguishable from last year's X & Y. It still has the sharp 3D art style, but it's disappointing no steps were taken to change or push forward the visuals

## ► Sound

The tunes are familiar and memorable, even if they do little to set themselves apart from past Pokémon games

## ► Playability

Diagonal movement returns, making exploration much easier to control. Some elements of the menu have been changed for easier navigation and searching, most notably in the Pokédex

Better pacing, lots of extra post-game content, and a handful of changes affecting the game throughout make Omega Ruby & Alpha Sapphire among the best Pokémon has to offer

## ► Replay Value

High

Significant changes are rare in the Pokémon series. Last year's X & Y marked one of the biggest steps forward for the series, but this year's follow-up returns to the process of making small, iterative updates. Thankfully, the changes in Omega Ruby and Alpha Sapphire are quite good, and these titles (remade from their original Game Boy Advance versions) also bring forward many of the best lessons learned from X & Y.

The basic Pokémon structure is in place. You make your way through a saccharine story about balance and nature while collecting creatures to battle with others who share your hobby. Building your army and watching them grow and evolve continues to be rewarding, and the addition of new and returning Mega Evolutions offers extra incentive to explore.

You don't endure much training or dialogue before you're able to steal Pokémon from their natural habitats and collect badges. I was even allowed to capture Pokémon before being formally instructed, showing Game Freak recognizes many players picking up these remakes are already familiar with the basics. That attention to pacing continues throughout; I never felt slowed down by text or unsure about where to go next. I even got automatically transported to the next story section on a few occasions to avoid excessive backtracking.

The PokéNav Plus (a.k.a. the stuff happening on the lower screen) offers some of the biggest

changes from X & Y. Playing online and wirelessly with nearby players is identical, which is good thing. Forgettable distractions like Pokémon-Amie and Super Training also return, and are best left ignored. New additions include the DexNav, the AreaNav, and the BuzzNav, and these are what set this iteration apart.

The BuzzNav is basically a 24-hour Pokémon news network, which you can keep open on the bottom screen. It is surprisingly successful at making the Hoenn region feel alive with updates happening in the world. I laughed out loud when I saw quotes I had written for a pair of newscasters (who I had battled earlier) appear on the channel. They asked what I thought of my starter Pokémon, and I wrote, "He's dumb." In the broadcast, they treated that quote from the great up-and-coming trainer Kyle with great reverence and status.

The DexNav and AreaNav are less peripheral, as they offer details about the world and its features in the form of an overhead map and a scanner looking for nearby Pokémon. Using these tools, you have a much easier time finding specific Pokémon you want. It also lets you know if you've captured all the available Pokémon types of each area on the map—a feature I have wanted for years. It's a handy tool for completionists, and a delightfully dangerous one for aspiring completionists who were never quite able to go all the way.

One of this entry's most publicized additions, soaring, takes a long time to unlock. You have

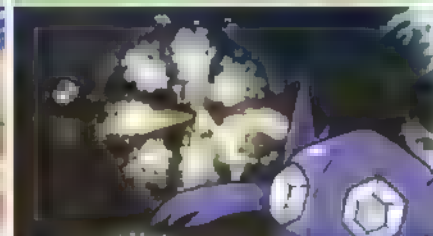
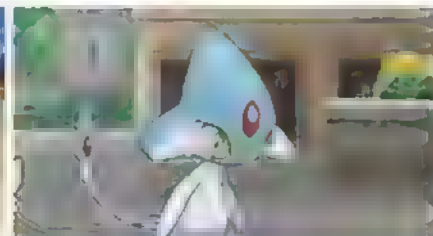
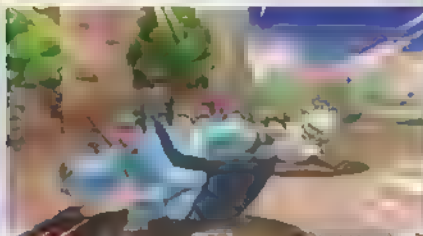
most of your badges by the time you finally get to take off and fly above Hoenn, but it's worth the wait. It gives players of the original Ruby and Sapphire a new perspective on the world (alongside the 3D upgrade), but even for those visiting Hoenn for the first time, seeing and controlling Pokémon in the air is exciting.

Some features from X & Y didn't make the cut (like character customization), but I don't miss them. Instead of customizing your avatar, you customize a secret base. It scratches the Anima. Crossing it off of organizing a home, but in the middle of an RPG about collecting and fighting monsters, I didn't feel particularly compelled to inspect and reorganize my room every time I found a new piece of furniture. Another new addition, Pokémon Contests, lets you show off your Pokémon in something akin to a fashion show, but there wasn't enough inherent incentive to make me interested in exploring its intricacies. Thankfully, the contests can be ignored entirely if you so choose.

The new PokéNav Plus elements are Omega Ruby and Alpha Sapphire's biggest and best new additions. They change the way you participate in Pokémon's most attractive mechanic—collecting Pokémon. It's what separates Omega Ruby and Alpha Sapphire from X & Y, and ultimately makes them superior games. Having a better sense of which creatures I still need and where to get them is something I've been craving, and it makes this iteration in the series my personal favorite. — Kyle Hilliard

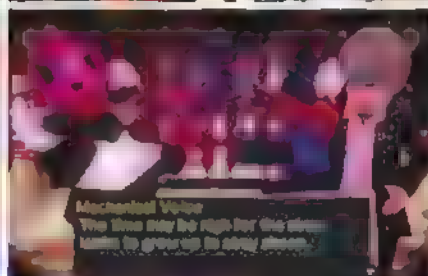
## The Difference Between Omega Ruby And Alpha Sapphire

As is the case with all dual Pokémon releases, the two titles don't feature many radical differences. The legendary Pokémon featured on the box art is the one you will have the opportunity to grab—Groudon in Omega Ruby and Kyogre in Alpha Sapphire. The Pokémon capable of soaring in the former is Latios, while the latter is Latias. The antagonists are also different in the two games—Team Magma in Omega Ruby and Team Aqua in Alpha Sapphire, though it doesn't change the storyline. There are also some Pokémon you will only find in one game and not the other to encourage trading



# Persona Q: Shadow Of The Labyrinth

Bringing out the best in each other



**GOLD**

**Style** 1-Player Role-Playing **Publisher** Atlus **Developer** Atlus **Release** November 25 **Rating** T

Combining two popular franchises can have disastrous results, but *Persona Q: Shadow of the Labyrinth* gets so much right. It brings two Atlus RPG series – *Persona* and *Etrian Odyssey* – together in an unexpected way, and each benefits from the strengths of the other. Thought *Etrian Odyssey* had an interesting characters? The *Persona* 3 and 4 casts add the personality that's been missing from the punishing dungeon crawler. Did you want *Persona*'s battle system to be more rewarding? The harrowing dungeons and new tweaks to combat keep you on your toes. *Persona Q: Shadow of the Labyrinth* has creativity and challenge around every corner, making it a stellar crossover.

*Persona* is fantastic at characterization, and *Persona Q* capitalizes on that when the casts of *Persona* 3 and 4 meet. The journey entails fighting through dungeons to discover why these two groups, along with two new amnesiac characters, have ended up together. The highlight is seeing how the casts of the two games interact, and of course, witnessing your favorite personalities again. Yes, Kanji still tries to act like a tough guy, but it's even more fun seeing him charmed by the adorable dog, Koromaru. Plenty of callbacks are present throughout *Persona Q*, and the charisma of the two groups keeps dungeon treks interesting.

As with the *Etrian Odyssey* games, this first-person dungeon crawler still has you mapping out areas with your stylus, a throwback to old-school RPGs like *Wizardry*. This requires a patient touch, as you must look every which way to make sure you've marked things, like doors and walls, correctly, or else you have to retrace every step. Some people might find this tedious, but there's something thrilling about emerging victorious after finding your own way through a dangerous area.

The *Etrian Odyssey* series has always provided a satisfying challenge, but it's struggled with a few things, such as uninteresting labyrinths. After themed dungeons spiced

things up in *Persona* 4, this game captivates with even more creative dungeons. All have fun and unique themes, like *Alice in Wonderland*, Japanese horror, and romance. These themes are incorporated in several clever ways; for instance, in the haunted labyrinth, the FOEs (mini-bosses) are terrifying babies who lunge at you, and you see footprints, blood dripping, and hands hanging down from above.

*Persona*'s focus on exploiting weaknesses returns in the turn-based combat, but it has some new wrinkles. Should you land a critical or hit a weak point, you get a boost, allowing that character to act first next turn and reducing the move cost to zero SP or HP. This plays into your strategy, but it also means you're not constantly leaving the dungeon to heal up. *Persona* fusion also becomes even more vital, as most characters can be equipped with a sub-persona that provides additional special moves and more HP and SP. You're creating new *Personas* for more than one character, which keeps you hooked on the fun fusion system, getting to test out more *Personas* than ever before.

Boss battles can be intense affairs, but they also have their own creative spins. For instance, I battled with a priest-like creature, who vowed that I couldn't use a certain attack or item. If I did, I would be severely punished by having a bunch of stat penalties and ailments unleashed on my disobedient character. As the difficulty escalates, expect instant death attacks and the need to constantly improve your *Persona* to survive. I loved constantly adjusting my strategy; I never felt safe, so I never took any turns for granted.

Getting through dungeons isn't about merely surviving, but also requires smart thinking. Sometimes this includes solving switch puzzles, other times it's about reading cryptic clues to find your next move. Many of these, especially those in later dungeons, give you so little to work with that I imagine many people will have to consult a guide. At the very least,

if you ceaselessly wander without a solution, some characters will provide clues or even offer to solve them for you. I wish you had the option to turn off or reduce encounters while you figure them out, as it's distracting getting thrown into battles as you try to piece things together. My only other complaint is a little too much reliance on backtracking, but it's never too daunting.

The reward loop is also well done. Like *Etrian Odyssey*, you collect items from defeating monsters and then sell them to the shop to unlock better items. Tackling a deadly FOE is even more satisfying, since you also get a higher-level *Persona* than you're able to fuse. Side quests hold a similar lure as you often receive a great deal of experience and quality items. They're also varied and often provide additional story. One had me facing off against Elizabeth from the Velvet Room, while another involved arranging a meet-up for Junpei with the *Persona* 4 girls to hilarious results.

*Persona Q* is easily one of my favorite games this year. It delivers in both quality gameplay and wonderful characters, but what stands out is the extra effort that went into every area, always raising the bar. » **Kimberley Wallace**



**9**

**3DS**

## » Concept

Explore labyrinths and fight evil to discover why the *Persona* 3 and 4 worlds have collided.

## » Graphics

The chibi versions of the *Persona* characters work well, separating this entry from past *Persona* games. The dungeons also look great, using a variety of colors that match each theme appropriately.

## » Voice

The voice acting is superb, and the classic *Persona* tracks and new mixes are fantastic, adding life and intensity.

## » Playability

This entry does a good job of melding the gameplay and style of both *Persona* and *Etrian Odyssey*. Multiple difficulties accommodate all skill levels.

## » Greenlight

*Persona Q* is strong on all fronts, from the great character interactions to the fun dungeons.

## » Replay Value

Moderate





## PLAYSTATION 4

Alien: Isolation	7.75	Nov-14
Call of Duty: Advanced Warfare	9	Dec-14
Destiny	8.75	Nov-14
Disney Infinity		
Marvel Super Heroes	6.5	Nov-14
Dragon Age: Inquisition	9.5	Dec-14
DriveClub	7.75	Dec-14
Evil Within: The	9	Dec-14
FIFA 15	9.25	Nov-14
Middle-earth: Shadow of Mordor	8.25	Nov-14
Natural Doctrine	6.5	Dec-14
NBA 2K15	7.75	Dec-14
NHL 15	5.5	Nov-14
Pier Solar HD	7	Dec-14
Sherlock Holmes: Crimes & Punishment	8	Dec-14
Skylanders: Trap Team	8.75	Dec-14

## XBOX ONE

Alien: Isolation	7.75	Nov-14
Call of Duty: Advanced Warfare	9	Dec-14

D4: Dark Dreams Don't Die	7.5	Nov-14
Dance Central: Spotlight	6	Nov-14
Destiny	8.75	Nov-14
Disney Infinity: Marvel Super Heroes	6.5	Nov-14
Dragon Age: Inquisition	9.5	Dec-14
Evil Within: The	9	Dec-14
Fantasia: Music Evolved	8.25	Dec-14
FIFA 15	9.25	Nov-14
Forza Horizon 2	8.25	Nov-14
Middle-earth: Shadow of Mordor	8.25	Nov-14
NBA 2K15	7.75	Dec-14
NHL 15	5.5	Nov-14
Project Spark	7.5	Dec-14
Sherlock Holmes: Crimes & Punishment	8	Dec-14
Skylanders: Trap Team	8.75	Dec-14
Sunset Overdrive	9.25	Dec-14

## PLAYSTATION 3

Assassin's Creed Rogue	8.25	Dec-14
Borderlands: The Pre-Sequel	7.5	Dec-14

Call of Duty: Advanced Warfare	9	Dec-14
Destiny	8.75	Nov-14
Disney Infinity: Marvel Super Heroes	6.5	Nov-14
Dragon Age: Inquisition	9.5	Dec-14
Evil Within: The	9	Dec-14
FIFA 15	9.25	Nov-14
NBA 2K15	7.75	Dec-14
NHL 15	7	Nov-14
Persona 4 Arena Ultimax	8.5	Dec-14
Pier Solar HD	7	Dec-14
Skylanders: Trap Team	8.75	Dec-14

## XBOX 360

Assassin's Creed Rogue	8.25	Dec-14
Borderlands: The Pre-Sequel	7.5	Dec-14
Call of Duty: Advanced Warfare	9	Dec-14
Destiny	8.75	Nov-14
Disney Infinity: Marvel Super Heroes	6.5	Nov-14
Dragon Age: Inquisition	9.5	Dec-14
Evil Within: The	9	Dec-14
Fantasia: Music Evolved	8.25	Dec-14

FIFA 15	9.25	Nov-14
NBA 2K15	7.75	Dec-14
NHL 15	7	Nov-14
Persona 4 Arena Ultimax	8.5	Dec-14
Project Spark	7.5	Dec-14
Skylanders: Trap Team	8.75	Dec-14

## Wii U

Bayonetta 2	9	Nov-14
Disney Infinity: Marvel Super Heroes	6.5	Nov-14
Hyrule Warriors	8	Nov-14
Skylanders: Trap Team	8.75	Dec-14

## PC

A City Sleeps	8	Dec-14
Call of Duty: Advanced Warfare	9	Dec-14
Civilization: Beyond Earth	9	Dec-14
Costume Quest 2	6.75	Dec-14
Dragon Age: Inquisition	9.5	Dec-14
Evil Within: The	9	Dec-14
Fenix Rage	6.5	Nov-14
FIFA 15	9.25	Nov-14

Gauntlet	7	Dec-14
Middle-earth: Shadow of Mordor	8.25	Nov-14
NBA 2K15	7.75	Dec-14
Neverending Nightmares	7.75	Dec-14
Pier Solar HD	7	Dec-14
Project Spark	7.5	Dec-14

Sherlock Holmes: Crimes & Punishment	8	Dec-14
Sims 4, The	6.75	Nov-14
Vanishing of Ethan Carter: The	8	Dec-14
Wasteland 2	8.75	Nov-14

## 3DS

Azure Striker Gunvolt	8	Nov-14
Fantasy Life	6	Dec-14
Super Smash Bros.	9.25	Nov-14

## VITA

Murasaki Baby	6	Dec-14
Natural Doctrine	6.5	Dec-14

the score

## 2 Escape Dead Is and

**Platform** PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, PC  
**Release** November 18 **Rating** M

While playing through *Escape Dead Island*, I was continually offended that anyone would be asked to pay for this experience. *Escape Dead Island* is worth nobody's time. — **Tim Turi**

## 7 République: Episode 3 – Ones & Zeroes

**Platform** iOS **Release** October 23 **Rating** 12+

The overall storytelling of Episode 3 is the strongest so far. The ending especially strikes a chord, and has left me more intrigued for the next episode than any of the previous cliffhangers. — **Bryan Vore**

## 7 Tales Of Hearts R

**Platform** Vita **Release** November 11 **Rating** T

*Tales of Hearts R* is an adequate RPG, but it doesn't do much to make itself memorable. The characters and story are throwaway, the dungeons feel like busywork, and yet it's still fun due to the solid gameplay and exploration. — **Kimberley Wallace**

## 7 Shantae And The Pirate's Curse

**Platform** 3DS **Release** October 23  
**Rating** E10+

Fans of *Shantae's* previous adventures will likely find more to love with *Pirate's Curse*, but there are enough superior retro-inspired games to make this one hard to recommend unless you've already played them all. — **Tim Turi**

## 8 Terra Battle

**Platform** iOS, Android  
**Release** October 9  
**Rating** 4+ (iOS), Everyone (Android)

If you can handle playing a few minutes here and there (or longer on sessions involving multi-stage content where every turn needs to be carefully considered), you'll have a great time. I'd recommend *Terra Battle* to anyone who plays smartphone games, and would absolutely suggest giving it a go for any tactical RPG enthusiast. — **Daniel Tack**

## 4 Sonic Boom: Rise Of Lyric

**Platform** Wii U **Release** November 11 **Rating** E10+

This new entry still suffers from problems that have plagued the series for years. Even worse, it layers on a new level of sloppy combat for Sonic and his friends. — **Tim Turi**

## 5.5 The Legend Of Korra

**Platform** PlayStation 4, Xbox One, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, PC  
**Release** October 21 **Rating** T

The *Legend of Korra* harkens back to the dubious tradition of budget-minded licensed games with a project that feels unbalanced, light on content, and tedious. Some nods to the excellent source material abound, and the beginnings of a compelling combat system are present, but this *Avatar's* journey ultimately fails to find enlightenment. — **Matt Miller**

## 7.75 Legend Of Grimrock II

**Platform** PC **Release** October 15 **Rating** NR

A meatier, more involved version of the first title from Almost Human Studios, and it succeeds at offering a customizable, nostalgia-laden quest through a number of interesting dungeons with swarms of enemies and puzzles. — **Daniel Tack**

Visit [gameinformer.com/mag](http://gameinformer.com/mag) for the full reviews.

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# Video Game Sci-Fi Timeline

**S**cience fiction gives us the opportunity to envision how the technology we create might change the universe. Video games have participated in this dream for decades, so we compiled their predictions into one unified timeline. Take a look at what our favorite form of entertainment forecasts for future generations. **by Ben Reeves**

**2023** ■ Ex-bounty hunter Joanna Dark begins working for the Carrington Institute and investigates the mega corporation DataDyne, discovering an alien cover-up and a plot to take over the world. (*Perfect Dark*)



**2114** ■ While on a mission to experiment with faster-than-light hyper drives, the starship *Von Braun* is taken over by an artificial intelligence program known as SHODAN, resulting in the deaths of most of the crew. (*System Shock 2*)



**2077** ■ The Great War erupts, eradicating most of Earth's population with nuclear fire. A few survivors seek refuge in underground vaults. (*Fallout 3*)



**2060** ■ After Earth has been ravaged by war, famine, and pollution, the U.N. launches the Starship Unity, hoping to give humanity a fresh start on another planet. (*Alpha Centauri*)



**2052** ■ A terrorist organization steals a shipment of vaccines for a virus called the Gray Death, leading the United Nations Anti-Terrorist Coalition to send their best nanotechnology-augmented agents after their leaders. (*Deus Ex*)



**2149** ■ Humans discover that Pluto's moon, Charon, is actually a mass relay, one of many mass-transit devices scattered across the galaxy. (*Mass Effect*)



**2435** ■ The peaceful mining planet of Hillys comes under siege by a group of aliens called the DomZ, who abducts much of the population and converts them into slaves. (*Beyond Good & Evil*)



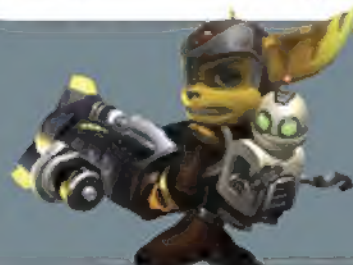
**2500** ■ While working with the Sons of Korhal on a mission in the Tarsonian system, Sarah Kerrigan is overrun by Zerg. She is then placed within a chrysalis and begins her transformation into the Queen of Blades. (*StarCraft*)



**2508** ■ While illegally mining ore in the Aegis Cluster, the *USG Ishimura* discovers a mysterious red marker. Not long afterward all communications from the ship cease, and the *USG Kellion* is dispatched to discover its whereabouts. (*Dead Space*)



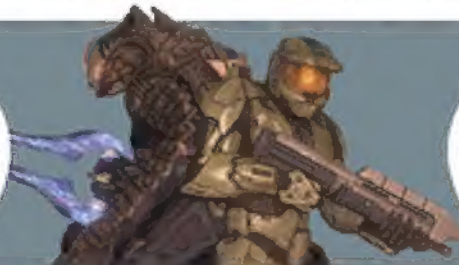
**23146** ■ Faster-than-light communications are discovered, allowing people to stay connected to each other and grief their friends on Facebook in real time. (*Eve Online*)



**5354** ■ A young Lombax named Ratchet begins constructing a spaceship with the dream of exploring the stars, when a tiny robot named Clank crash-lands in his backyard. (*Ratchet & Clank*)



**2669** ■ Thirty years into the Terran-Kilrathi War, a prototype Temblor bomb is tested in the uninhabited Hyperion system, successfully destroying an entire planet. (*Wing Commander III*)



**2525** ■ The UEG colony of Harvest detects an unknown object via long-range radar. Soon after, all contact with Harvest is lost. Recovery efforts discover that the planet was destroyed by an alien group called the Covenant. (*Halo: Combat Evolved*)



**2510** ■ The Galaxy Federation government is founded and begins emigrating the Earth's population into space. (*Xenosaga*)





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